

"I had made the impression I wished, and followed it
up quickly." (Page 123.)

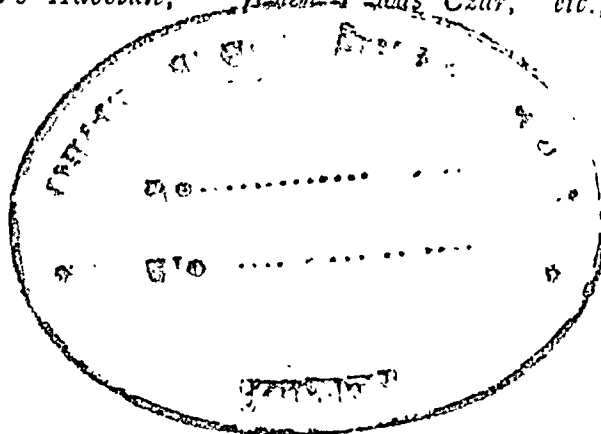
The Little Anarchist

[Frontispiece]

THE LITTLE ANARCHIST

BY
ARTHUR W. MARCHMONT

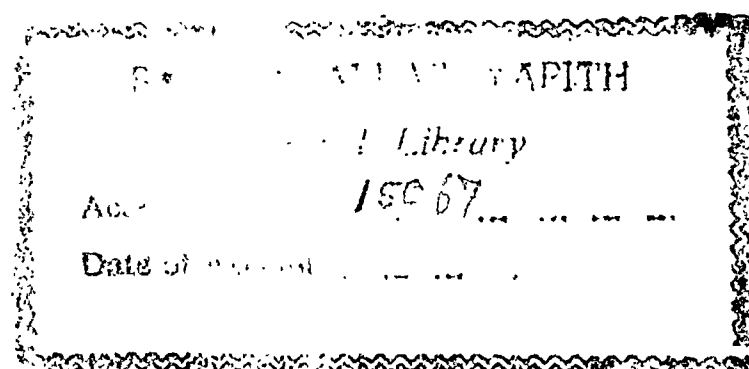
Author of
"The Queen's Advocate," "When I was Czar," etc., etc.



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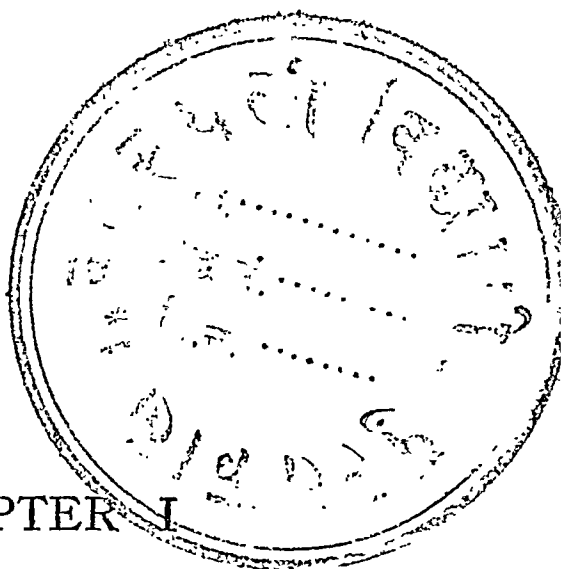
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CHAPTER I

MY MISSION

"IT is officially stated that one of the prisoners liberated in the strikers' attack upon the prison at Kischineff is the young and beautiful woman known as 'The Little Anarchist.' She is said to have fled north and to be attempting to leave the country. Her real name is Mirla Gorkov."

"Mirla Gorkov!" I repeated the name with an involuntary whistle of astonishment, loud enough to draw upon me the eyes of my fellow-passenger—a delightfully pretty girl with the loveliest frank blue eyes and bright mobile features—who was travelling with a sort of companion. At least, I put her down as the companion, because of the contrast between the costly attire of the one and the plain dress of the other.

I turned aside and looked out at the scenery through which we were passing at that leisurely pace which passes in Russia for express speed.

"Mirla Gorkov." It was certainly an extraordinary coincidence if nothing more;

and I hoped with all my heart that it *was* nothing more.

I laid the paper down and took out my cousin's letter.

"Monsieur permits?" It was the companion who asked, reaching toward my paper. I handed it to her with a murmured word in Russian, and then read Sir Andrew's letter.

"MY DEAR DICK,—

"This to ask you to do me a good turn. I am laid by the heels. I slipped on an infernal banana peel just outside the club—why people want to eat fruit in the streets I can't imagine, any more than I can why that fool of a County Council can't clean the place up—and have strained my knee. Jessop says water on the knee if I stir: and there's the mess. I'm due in a few days at Minsk to see Mirla to England. But if I attempt it, she'd have to marry a lame 'un: 'lame for life,' says Jessop. I'd reckoned on getting out and back in time for Ascot, and now it'll be all I can do to get fit by then. I can't decently put her off any longer; so I want you, like a good sort, to go to Minsk from Königsberg—Chichester of the Foreign Office tells me you will call there in your yacht—and just bring her home for me. With things in Russia in this beastly mix up, she can't come alone. I've looked up the map and see you can easily get to Minsk, so it will only be a matter of a couple of trains; and you know Russia so well and speak the lingo and like travelling

—all of which I don't. Explain things to her. I rely on you.

Your affectionate cousin,
“ANDREW CARSTAIRS.

“PS.—Chichester says you may want a passport for Russia just now, so he put that through and I enclose it.

“PPS.—By the way, you may have forgotten the full name—Countess Mirla Gorkov. Of course I'll let her know you're coming.”

It was true that I had almost forgotten the name. My cousin's engagement had been a puzzle. The very type of an insular Briton, he had come back from Carlsbad a year before—having been driven there by his doctor to take the waters—and announced that he was engaged to marry a very pretty Russian Countess. He had raved about her beauty for a fortnight, and then—well, that seemed to be all, until I got his letter at Königsberg asking me to escort her to England in his stead.

So far as I knew to the contrary, his Countess and “The Little Anarchist” of the newspaper might be one in person as they were in name; and a pleasant time I should have of it in that case smuggling a well-known Anarchist across the Russian frontier.

A start, a quick rustling of the paper, and a laugh from the other side of the carriage interrupted me; the two heads were bent

close together, and I saw the companion point out to her mistress some piece of news. The blue eyes clouded, the forehead wrinkled in thought, the curving under lip was bitten by pearl-white shapely teeth, and after a glance of caution at the companion and a gesture in my direction, she began to speak in rapid low tones in French.

It being clear that they did not wish me to know what they said, I thought it best to intervene with an apology that I spoke French.

They were silent on the instant; and the mistress, with the faintest nod of thanks, gave me a rapid glance of mingled inquiry and doubt.

I was sorry for the doubt. Her goodwill and confidence I felt had suddenly become objects of keen desire. Never in my life had I been so moved by a woman's eyes as by those which had flashed their light upon me in that fleeting glance. I began to consider whether I could not find a decent excuse for opening a conversation.

The silence lasted for five minutes, perhaps, when the companion broke it with a laugh and began to talk in German.

Her mistress hesitated before replying, and again glanced at me. I accepted the look as an invitation to declare my knowledge of German, and did so.

There was more amusement than doubt in her face as again she acknowledged my admission with a bow.

This seemed to be my chance. "I am

sorry to be such a nuisance," I said, in what I meant to be my pleasantest manner.

But my smile was wasted upon the carriage cushions. She withdrew into a very mountain fastness of reserve ; affected not to have heard me and took up again the book which she had been reading. The companion shrugged her shoulders, gave me back the newspaper and resumed her knitting. I covered my repulse by taking a book from my bag.

My reading was a mere pretence. I was hunting all round my mind for a working excuse to put off my cousin's task and take up instead one on my own account. I was eager to find out where my companion was going, where she lived, who she was, and all about her. I had plenty of Russian friends, and might be able to get an introduction. Andrew's affair could surely wait.

"He is not ugly, this man of many languages.

This sentence in broken English from the companion broke so abruptly into my thoughts that involuntarily I smiled and looked across the carriage. The consciousness of the clumsiness of my act instantly eclipsed the sense of humour of the situation.

"Your pardon," I said very awkwardly, "I am an Englishman."

The maid was overcome with confusion, and the mistress with a flush of annoyance glanced angrily at her, and then said to me in Russian with great dignity : "We owe you an apology, monsieur."

I murmured some fatuous reply ; but it drew no more than a formal bow from her as she went back to her book, after stopping a moment to speak in rebuke to her companion.

This second rebuff piqued me, and at the same time stiffened my resolve to know more about her. But there was clearly nothing to be done for the moment. I settled myself, therefore, in such a position that from the security of my book I could study her ; the regular profile, the poise of the shapely head, the graceful gestures, the long sweeping lashes, the——

I was in the midst of this dreaming when the train stopped unexpectedly, the door was thrown open, and an official told us to get out at once as an axle had heated and the carriage was on fire.

I was surprised to find a considerable crowd on the platforms, as the place, Britski, was a very insignificant one. But I learnt that there had been a demonstration of the strikers there against the owners of a couple of mills ; and that many had come in from Minsk on the one side and Vilna on the other. They were certainly a very unkempt ugly-looking crowd as they gathered in groups about the station discussing and arguing one with another, or listening in dogged sullen silence to those who appeared to be leaders as they declaimed in heated tones and with a prodigality of muscular energy and much clenching of brawny fists—all boding very ill to some one

This went on for about an hour while the railway authorities were cutting out the injured carriage with that exasperating slowness which is the pride of Russian railwaymen. I had not been in Russia since the commencement of open hostilities by the strikers, and I was greatly interested in listening and observing it all ; and when I heard a big row at the end of the platform I hurried to the spot.

Hoots, execrations, groans and hisses broke out. Two or three women, white faced and terror-possessed, hurried past me ; followed by some respectably dressed men, scarcely less frightened : and I overheard mutterings about the strikers and violence and so on.

As I reached the fringe of the crowd a virago of a woman shouted at the pitch of her shrill voice : " She's an aristocrat—an aristocrat ! Look at her clothes ! Tear them off her back ! " and one or two of those round echoed the cry with cheers.

I caught my breath instinctively as I saw the cause of the turmoil.

In the centre of a crowd of strikers stood my travelling companion, pale, but perfectly cool and undaunted as she faced the men who stormed and shouted at her wildly, pointing fiercely to her dress, and thrusting their ugly furious faces close to hers that they might the better hiss out their threats and execrations.

I was through that crowd in less time than it takes to tell it ; and I am not likely to for-

get the smile and the look of relief with which the blue eyes greeted me.

To have attempted force was out of the question. At the slightest show of it they would have had us both down and trampled the life out of us. But I had had experience of a Russian mob before.

I held up my hand and shouted for silence. Then I turned and scowled at the girl and said in English: "Slip away the moment you can"; and added aloud an imprecation about the aristocracy, which brought loud cheers from the crowd.

Next I drew the attention of every man and woman from her to myself by taking out a handful of money and declaring that I was delegated to distribute it among all who were present—a rouble to every woman and half a rouble to every man.

That did it. I appointed a committee on the spot; picking out those who had been leaders in the attack, and set them to work haggling and higgling over the money as only your lower class Russian can.

In the midst of it I saw my man, Parker, coming to call me to the train which was ready.

"God save Russia," I cried in a loud voice, waving my cap; and a raucous response, with a cheer for myself, followed as I hurried to the carriage in which Parker had put my things.

To my infinite chagrin the compartment, was empty.



“ I held up my hand and shouted for silence.”

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"I thought you'd like a carriage to yourself, sir," said Parker.

"There were two ladies with me before."

"They're in another compartment, sir. They wanted to get in here, but I told them it was reserved. I knew you'd rather travel alone, sir. You always do."

"Very thoughtful of you, Parker," I said, drily; and I had to get in, for the train was on the point of starting.

We stopped once more before Minsk, and I got out and walked along the train. The girl saw me and came to the window.

"How can I thank you, monsieur?" she said.

"By telling me who you are and how I can see you again," I should like to have said; but I murmured some conventional phrase.

"Ah, but how can I tell you what I felt when you came to me! I thought those men would have torn me to pieces"; and as if impulsively she gave me her hand.

I had scarcely time to take it when the train began to move and I had to run for my carriage. But the pressure of her fingers was on mine all the way to Minsk, and the light of her glorious eyes was making havoc with every one of my old resolutions of distrust of women.

At Minsk, I noticed, with a little glow of satisfaction, that she left the train. In a small place like that I knew I should find her

easily, while my cousin's betrothed would probably get me an introduction.

I told Parker we should stay at the *Kaiserhof*, just outside the station, and picking up a small bag, I sauntered down the platform.

Again I saw her. She was standing by a half-closed doorway in earnest talk with a young, well-dressed, handsome man. Through the doorway I caught a glimpse of the companion getting into a smart brougham. It was soon evident that the man was intentionally preventing her from leaving the station; and when at length I saw him put himself deliberately right in front of her, blocking the way, I thought I could intervene usefully.

As if I were an ordinary passenger in a hurry to leave the station, I made for the door. He had to give way, of course; and as soon as the road was clear I stepped back, leaving the passage open for her, and raised my hat.

She slipped past, and then I dropped my bag and blocked the man from following.

He said something nasty in Russian about my clumsiness; but I affected not to hear him, and called in English to Parker who had now come up. I noticed the Russian start and give me a very keen glance as he moved away.

I walked across to the *Kaiserhof*, and was being shown to my rooms when Parker, who had a rooted belief that every Russian was a spy, either Nihilist or Government, told me the man had followed us.

"He's down there asking about you, sir," he said, pointing over the balustrade into the hall below. It was so; and I saw him examine the hotel register and speak to the clerk.

"Who is that gentlemen at the desk?" I asked the attendant.

"Count Otto Zuloff, Excellency."

Good. If other ways failed, I might find means to induce *him* to tell me where to find my travelling companion.

I went to my rooms, had an excellent bath, dined well, and was sitting smoking and thinking out a plan of campaign, wondering if, and when, and how, and where I should see those blue eyes again, feel the pressure of the little hand, hear the voice that had so thrilled me, and, in fact, dreaming that sort of idle but delightful nonsense which I suppose all men dream at some time in their lives, when the door was opened brusquely and my friend of the railway station, Count Otto Zuloff, entered.

"Your name is Richard Carstairs, Englishman?" he said, in the curtest and most official tones.

"Yes."

"You arrived this evening?"

"I did."

"You are to leave Russia to-night. Here is the order;" and he took out a paper and flourished it before my eyes.

"Why?"

"I am not instructed to give you any

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reasons ; merely to see that you comply with the order."

"And if I refuse ? "

"I'll see that you don't," he rapped back with an oath. "There's a train starts in half an hour : and I'll see that you go by it."

"Well, but——"

"No words ; go," he cried fiercely, and he drew out a revolver. "Disobey the order and the consequences will be on your own head ;" and with that he levelled it point blank at me.

And this was what my cousin had termed "only a matter of a couple of trains." It looked as if it were going to be true ; but not quite in the sense he had meant.

CHAPTER II

A PRISONER

I KNOW no more powerful thought stimulant than a revolver pointed straight at your head. Thus as I stared into the ugly little muzzle of Count Otto's weapon, I soon came to a decision.

I had seen too many of the "tough" spots of the world not to know that the man who flourishes a revolver needlessly is very rarely dangerous. He is a bluffer; but is too much afraid of the consequences to himself to shoot.

Moreover, I had been too much in Russia to mistake the Count for a police agent. He was obviously actuated by some private motive; and I could not believe that it was merely anger caused by the little incident at the railway station. In the language of Poker, I determined to "see" him.

"Show me the order of expulsion," I said.

"This order is not for you to read, it is for you to obey."

"You must be aware I have the right to see it. Show it me."

With an angry gesture he flourished it before me, and much to his surprise I snatched it out of his hand.

Then I made my bluff. Calling my ser-

vant from the inner room, I said, "Parker, this is Count Otto Zulloff, pretending to be a police agent. He threatens to shoot me. If he does it you will at once inform the British Consul here, and telegraph home that no effort or money is to be spared until he has been hanged for murder."

"Mr. Carstairs, sir," cried poor Parker in great distress.

"Do what I have said. Now, Count Otto, you can shoot me—if you dare. I am going to take that revolver from you." With that I rose very deliberately and went toward him. His eyes told me instantly that he had no relish for this unexpected development, and when I was within a yard of him he lowered his weapon and pocketed it.

"I ought not to have drawn this perhaps," he began when I cut him short.

"Give me that pistol," I said very sharply. He hesitated. "Do you mean to compel me to take it from you? I can do it, you know." I was tall and broad and was in the pink of condition. He was tall and broad too, but washed out with drink and dissipation.

"I will lay it on the table," he said, thinking probably to lessen the humiliation somewhat. He did so. I put it out of his reach and then sent Parker away.

"Now we can talk on something like equal terms, and you can tell me what is the meaning of this." I read the order of expulsion carefully, and I saw at once that, like the revolver flourishing, it was also mere

sham. The body of the order and the signature were in the same hand : by itself sufficient to show it was bogus. He watched me anxiously as I read it.

"It means you are to leave Russia," he said doggedly.

"Who means it ?" I asked with a smile ; and placing writing materials before him I added, "Write the first two lines of this and then the signature."

"I will do nothing of the kind," he cried, angrily.

"Why not ? You have done it before—here ;" and I held out the order toward him with a steady look.

"This is an insult ! I won't stay here to be insulted !" he exclaimed, jumping up.

"The door is open for you to leave. I charge you with having forged this order for my expulsion and with coming here to frighten me out of the country. You will either tell me why you did it or I shall take it at once to the authorities and let them act. Here—you can take this with you," I added with a sneer, as I pushed his pistol over to him. "You are not the kind to be afraid of, armed or unarmed."

"You insulted me at the station to-day," he said, after a pause.

"I merely helped a young lady to get away from you when you were worrying her ; but if you want to treat that as an insult you may."

The result of my words surprised me. He

started, came a pace forward, stared hard at me, swore softly under his breath, and then threw himself down again in his chair and laughed.

"Mr. Carstairs, I believe to heaven that I'm a fool and owe you an apology."

"I don't wish to disturb your belief," said I drily.

"You're right about that order. I wrote it and I did mean to frighten you away with it. You see I took you for the ordinary kind of Englishman, so I brought the revolver too."

"The ordinary kind of Englishman is a good deal better than the ordinary kind of Russian anyhow," I rapped back.

"I meant no reflection on your countrymen. But I have made a mistake. I took you for an Englishman of the same name whose presence in Minsk is not wanted and will not be tolerated. A Sir Carstairs who is betrothed to the Countess Mirla Gorkov. I thought he had come on that business and—well, it's a marriage that will not be allowed."

I did not think it policy to tell him just yet that that was the object of my presence in Minsk. He would not have told me.

"I offer you an unreserved apology for my mistake and the errors into which it led me."

"Very well; the matter is ended," I replied, and gave him back the paper.

"By heavens, when I think of it I laugh, and yet I am ashamed."

"Pretty easy going to be able to laugh at

forging an order and threatening to blow a man's brains out, isn't it? But then we all have our ideas of humour."

"Oh, I did not mean to shoot you; and as for the order, I have influence. Permit me"; and he offered me a cigarette. I declined, and he lit one. "You have a cool head, Mr. Carstairs. Any other man would probably have been on his way to the frontier by now."

"Any other Englishman would probably have knocked you down and sent for the police."

He laughed, easily. "You are a curious people. But I shall hope to see more of you while in Minsk—although perhaps you are not staying long?"

"That will depend upon circumstances."

"It is not a pleasant place just now. The strikers are getting quite out of hand. We have had ten assassinations—three of them bomb outrages—within the past month. The streets are very dangerous at night and unsafe even in the day. But our social life goes on, in a degree. Perhaps you will be my guest at the club? We have a club—not like Petersburg of course—but still a club."

"I think it very likely I shall see you again," I answered, with more meaning than he thought. "But to-night I am tired with my journey."

"A thousand pardons for my thoughtlessness in detaining you." He spoke as earnestly as though his had been the most ordinary visit; and getting up he offered me his hand.

"Came to shoot and stayed for small talk," I thought when he had left, and I was pondering over the extraordinary visit. One thing was clear. This was going to be no pleasure jaunt. If all the Countess's family were as much opposed as this Count to her going to England to marry my cousin, it looked very much as though I should go back without her—unless I stayed on indefinitely for my own purposes.

I wrote a short letter to my cousin's Countess telling her of my arrival in Minsk and that I hoped to have the pleasure of calling on her the following afternoon; and as Count Otto had told me the streets were dangerous at night, I thought I would test the truth of this myself by taking my letter to the post.

As I passed through the hall of the hotel, the proprietor stopped me. "Your pardon, but you will not venture out, Monsieur?"

"Venture?" I repeated, with a pause on the word. "I am going out to post my letter; that's all."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Forgive me if I seem to intrude, but you are a stranger and do not know the risks you would run. The streets are dangerous."

"How far is your post office?"

"Some four hundred yards."

"And I can't walk four hundred yards without danger?"

"You might cross the whole city, but on the other hand—Ah!" The exclamation

burst from him as a young, slim fellow, dark eyed, white faced and panting for breath in mingled exhaustion and terror, dashed in and rushed up to him.

"For the love of God, hide me, M. Bernhoff. They're after me. For the love of God!"

It was difficult to look unmoved upon a face so full of agony as that which was turned in pleading to the man by my side.

But he shook his head. "More than my own life is worth."

The young fellow closed his eyes for a brief space of tense suffering, and at that instant we heard the hoarse murmur of a crowd.

The white face all sweat-bedewed with fear was lifted at the sound and the lips quivered till the teeth chattered. "I am a woman, M. Bernhoff." This in a low voice caught only by us two. "Lend me a revolver. You know what will happen if they catch me."

I caught my breath. This was more than I could stand. "Did they know you came here," I asked.

"No, I was far ahead."

"You run no risk, monsieur. This girl must have shelter." She turned on me a look of intense gratitude. The noise of the on-coming crowd was increasing fast. "You can't turn her out to those devils."

For a moment he hesitated, his lips pursed and his brow, drawn in a heavy frown, and his eyes hard as the Judgment Day. But he yielded.

"Ivan," he called to a lad who stepped up. "Hide this girl, quick, then come back. We may have trouble. You owe this to his Excellency here," he added to the girl, who caught my hand and pressed her hot lips to it, as she hurried away.

"You may see the hotel sacked for this, Monsieur. You English do not understand Russia."

"Who is the girl?" I asked.

"I know not. A Jewess of course. This is a Jew bait and the men are not pleasant fellows when baulked of their prey."

To judge by the noise they made, this was true enough. In a few moments they were swarming round the door of the hotel and one or two of the leaders, rough ugly devils too, entered.

"Anyone come in lately?" asked one.

"I hope so, I don't keep the place open to see it empty," answered M. Bernhoff easily.

"Seen anything of a dark young Jew? They say he came in here."

"Who say? Who's the rascal that dares to charge me with harbouring a Jew?" he burst out with well-played indignation. Show him to me and I'll deal with him. I pledge you my word that no man of the kind you mention has come here. If he had, you know me well enough to be sure I should have thrown him out. Show me the scoundrel that said it;" and he went up to them so threateningly that they backed out.

In a moment there was a loud altercation

outside ; and then a cry being raised some distance down the street the mob rushed off with a clatter and tumult and shouts that made the night hideous.

"Thank heaven," murmured Bernhoff with a sigh of relief. "A straw would have turned it the other way."

"Where are the police ?" I asked.

"Probably some of them in the crowd, monsieur ?"

"What ; hunting a poor devil to death ?"

The hotel proprietor shrugged his shoulders. "What's a Jew more or less ? Do you still think of going out ?"

I did not. I posted my letter in the hotel and went back to my rooms.

My mission certainly promised plenty of excitement ; and I could not refrain from a smile at the thought of how my cousin would have relished it if that banana peel had not put him out of action. I should have had a strong grievance against those who eat bananas in the street and throw the peel where others can slip down on it—but for one thing.

Well, for two things, rather. Two blue eyes which haunted my sleep that night. And in the morning I had forgiven that eater of bananas ; and I resolved that that day should see my search well begun. I wished indeed that I had told Countess Mirla that I would call in the morning instead of the afternoon. I was eager to question her.

About eleven o'clock I went out to see

what Minsk was like and I soon had abundant evidence of the popular unrest.

The city appeared to be marked about equally by disorderly commotion and comparative desolation. The side streets were like these of our own city on a Sunday ; while the main thoroughfares were clogged by throngs of men of pretty much the same class as those at Britski. The shops were not shut ; but very little business appeared to be done, for nearly every one I passed was empty of customers.

I heard that nearly all the factories and workshops were closed : the men having been called out by their leaders : and all the strikers seemed to have taken possession of the main streets ; some listening to speakers ; others arguing and wrangling among themselves ; others just prowling about, ripe for any kind of mischief as they peered at the shops and houses with looks that were eloquent of such thoughts.

In the Market Place, a fine open square, the crowd was dense and vast ; and half a dozen excited speakers were delivering fiery speeches against the government, the aristocracy, and law and order generally, preaching up earth as the birthright of the people, the sacred cause of liberty as interpreted by themselves, and the gospel of assassination gauzily veiled as the " wild justice of revenge." Revolution in the making. Nothing less.

The police did nothing ; but whether from terror of the strikers, sympathy with them, or

paucity of their own numbers, I could not judge. But I saw both men and women openly baited under the very eyes of the police who did not raise a hand either to defend the victims or arrest the miscreants.

Some troops marched past and before them the crowd fell back in sullen silence ; but as soon as they had gone matters went on just the same.

I stopped now and then to listen to one or other of the speakers ; but I was warned once by the police that I ran a risk ; and several times I was the object of insulting jeers and flouts from the crowd.

So far as I could observe there was not another respectably dressed man on foot ; and certainly not a woman. They passed me on horseback and in carriages ; but never on foot. As Count Otto had said, it was not safe.

I had not come to Minsk to play at fisticuffs with the mob so I turned out of the Market Place to make my way back to the hotel. I had gone some hundred yards or more when my attention was attracted to a very rough scrimmage in which a man, said to be a police spy, played the part of football. As I was standing watching it a man left a group of companions and sauntered up to my side, looking me searchingly up and down.

I did not like his manner, so I watched him closely. He had a strong brutish face ; heavy sensual features ; a pair of singularly large flop ears ; grey-blue eyes, very cold and cruel ; and red hair, beard and moustache,

all shaggy and untrimmed. A very repulsive creature, altogether.

He did not speak to me ; but I noticed some signals pass between him and his companions ; and as I thought these had reference to me, I judged it prudent to get away

I was moving off when a young man came dashing along at headlong speed.

He halted close to me and looked about him. Seeing my neighbour, he gesticulated excitedly, and pointed back in the direction he had come. The new-comer's excitement spread to all the group. I was overlooked for this more important business, whatever it was. The red-headed man left me and moved to the front of the pavement ; and all of them stretched their necks along the road, expectantly.

I followed their gaze ; and then my heart gave a leap.

An open carriage was coming that way in which by the side of a handsome military looking man sat the girl whose blue eyes had been haunting me so persistently.

I pushed to the front to get a better look at her ; and, to my intense pleasure, when the carriage was some ten yards away, she caught sight of me. She spoke to her companion who began to check the horses.

At that instant some one lunged against me. It was the red-haired brute ; and to my consternation I saw that he held a bomb in his hands which he was in the very act of hurling under the carriage.

I caught his wrist, snatched the infernal thing from him, and sent him staggering and cursing into the gutter.

The next moment I was the centre of a howling mob of the strikers headed by the red-haired devil who led a chorus of curses, abuse and infuriated foulness as they surged about me shrieking to one another to tear me to pieces.

They would have done it too had I not succeeded by a rare piece of luck in reaching the wall behind. I set my back against it, raised the bomb and, facing this way and that, swore I would dash it into the face of the first of them who dared to lay hands on me.

This stopped them. They had no fancy to face the death to which they could so glibly doom others ; and the pause was long enough to enable some troops and police to reach the spot. They bashed and smashed a lane for themselves through the mob, who broke and fled as soon as they saw they were outnumbered.

Then the ridiculous happened.

The police, seeing the bomb in my hand, jumped with characteristic shrewdness to the conclusion that I was the would-be assassin. In a trice it was snatched from me, my hands were caught and held behind my back, I was hustled this way and thrust that—all ways at once it seemed to me—and made a prisoner, to the accompaniment of kicks and blows, plentiful enough to have almost satisfied the mob.

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A strong guard was formed and, despite my repeated protests, I was shoved into the middle of it to be marched off to gaol.

CHAPTER III

MIRLA

WHAT the Russian police have taken, whether prisoners or loot, they part with very reluctantly. They were so elated over their capture of me and so confident that I was a bomb-thrower taken red-handed, that it was no easy task to undeceive them, despite the fact that the man I had seen in the carriage pushed through to my help and was evidently well known.

"He had the bomb in his hand, Highness," insisted the leader of the police doggedly. "We all saw it."

"But I saw what happened. He took it from a red-haired rascal in the crowd, just as he was in the act of throwing it."

"Jacob here took it from him, Highness."

"I mean before you came up."

"He was about to hurl it at the crowd when we came up, Highness."

"The crowd was going to tear me to pieces and I threatened them with it in self-defence," I put in.

"They all say that," declared the police.

"Fool. Woodenhead," cried the other, hotly. "I tell you the bomb was about to be thrown under my carriage, and this gentle-

man prevented it. You came up and blundered, like the wool-witted idiots you are, and now make him a prisoner. A set of wooden jackasses."

This was the kind of argument which they could best understand seemingly ; and they began to weaken a little.

"I suppose you are not such dunderheads as not to know my name ?"

"Prince Volonesh, Highness." This very respectfully, as to a man who had full right to abuse them as much as he pleased.

"Well, then, I will be answerable for this gentleman. He will go with me to my house—you will, monsieur ?" he asked, turning to me.

"Most certainly," said I, readily.

"He will go with me to my house and you can report what has occurred, and your superiors can see him there ;" and without more ado he pushed to my side, shouldered the police away, released me, and putting his arm through mine led me toward the carriage.

"Please don't think by this unceremonious method that you are still a prisoner, monsieur. You have saved my life ; and after what has occurred you will be a marked man in Minsk. I have heard what you did yesterday also for my young kinswoman ; and I am going to insist"—he smiled most pleasantly—"that you remain in my house while you are in the town."

"But——," I began.

"Your safety demands that, and my grati-

tude will be satisfied with no less. You must allow me to make it my special care. You will not refuse me ? ”

I was only too delighted to consent, of course—thinking of the kinswoman.

We reached the carriage, and she welcomed me with a smile and heightened colour as she stretched out her hand.

“ You are destined to be my preserver, monsieur.” I am sure my heart beat faster as I took it than when I had been facing the angry tossing mob, clamouring for my life.

I murmured some commonplace about having done nothing as I got into the carriage.

Then with a single simple sentence, Prince Volonesh shattered all the fool castles I had been building.

Gathering up the reins and turning the horses he said : “ I think, Mirla, that even Mr. Carstairs must wait this morning. We had better get home at once—the Princess may hear something and be anxious.” Then to me—“ The Countess Mirla Gorkov.”

“ Mirla Gorkov ! ” I turned cold at the thought of all this meant ; and for the moment was even too confused to answer his implied question and give him my name. This was the girl whom I was to escort to England for my cousin to marry. This girl who—in a moment every fatuous thought I had had about her seemed to take shape and form in my mind to mock and jibe at me. My head was in a whirl and I must have changed colour.

I was dimly conscious that the Prince was speaking: "We were on our way to the *Kaiserhof* to pay a formal visit to an Englishman, Mr. Carstairs, who——"

"You are not well, monsieur. This terrible experience has distressed you," broke in Mirla, in a tone of deep concern and sympathy.

With a big effort I rallied my stupid wits.

"It is nothing, nothing; not that at all. I was but struck by the coincidence. My name is Carstairs."

"You!" cried Mirla in a tone of profound astonishment, as the colour mounted and spread all over her face, only to fade almost as quickly, leaving her pale and agitated.

Prince Volonesh was so surprised and I think chagrined, that the start he gave checked the horses; then I saw him bite his lip and he cut them with the whip quite savagely. I noted that little action for future guidance. I recalled Count Otto's words that they were all against the marriage; and I should have been blind indeed not to see that my announcement had been so distasteful as to lash him into a rage.

The situation was suddenly full of embarrassment; but the Prince had not had a diplomatic training for nothing.

"I am glad to welcome you to Minsk, Mr. Carstairs," he said.

"It appears to be a town in which such a welcome is to be profoundly desired. Last night I was witness of a Jew bait: to-day,

before I saw you, the crowd looked as though they would have baited me. At such a time a friend is a friend indeed."

"We must take care that your name does not get known in connexion with this affair to-day, or you would not be safe for a day in Minsk. Matters are indeed at a very serious pass."

Was this meant to scare me away? Count Otto's tactics in a diplomatic dressing?

"Presumably I shall not be here long," I answered. At this Mirla, who was looking down, glanced at me for an instant and then away again.

The Prince made difficulties with the horses—I knew enough about driving to perceive this—and it saved him from the necessity of replying. Obviously I had touched the button of a very live wire; and for the rest of the ride scarcely a word more was said.

When we drove into the courtyard of the house, a large building surrounded by high walls, the Prince led me in and appeared to have determined upon the line to take in regard to my presence.

"I assure you, Mr. Carstairs, you are welcome. My house will be your home while you are in Minsk. You will send to the *Kaiserhof* for your luggage?"

"I am really obliged to you, Prince. We will speak of it again presently, with your permission."

"I can take no refusal, Mr. Carstairs."

As he said this, his wife came up and he presented me.

"No honour we can pay Mr. Carstairs is too great, Molda. He has saved my life and Mirla's to-day at the imminent risk of his own."

Mirla said nothing ; but while the Princess thanked me effusively, she went away and sat down looking intensely perplexed and more than a little troubled.

"Mr. Carstairs will remain here, Molda, during his stay in Minsk," added the Prince.

For a moment a shade of surprise and dislike clouded her face and then she smiled. She was twenty years younger than her husband ; a very handsome, voluptuous looking woman, with magnificent dark eyes and very expressive features.

"We should take it as a slight, indeed, Mr. Carstairs, if you were not to stay with us. It is best in all interests."

"And now if you will I should like to speak to you privately, Mr. Carstairs. Mirla, you will remain, of course."

She looked up and said slowly, "Yes, I will remain, of course."

He took me to his library, gave me a most comfortable chair and placed a box of cigars at my elbow, and a servant brought an elaborate array of wines and spirits. I chose a whisky and soda. "That is a favourite drink in England," he said with a smile.

"Very." I added. "You have been in England, Prince ?"

"Oh, yes. I have a great admiration for the English as a nation."

"You do not care for them considered as husbands, however?"

He was lighting his cigarette and paused to look and smile. "Why do you say that?"

"On the authority of Count Otto who came to me last night at the *Kaiserhof*."

"Otto is often very indiscreet. He is my wife's brother."

"He is concerned of course in what you wish to say to me on the subject of this marriage? I gathered so from his conduct last night."

"I had better tell you just how the matter stands. Mirla has taken a line in this affair which is diametrically opposed to the wishes of her family—of which I am the head. We order these things differently from you in England, and it was with surprise and indignation we heard, when she returned from Carlsbad last year, that she was betrothed to your cousin, Sir Andrew Carstairs."

"Ours is a pretty old family, Prince, and not a poor one."

"It is not that," he replied, with a wave of the hand, "not that at all, of course. She has set us all at defiance. We have never countenanced the betrothal, we shall never consent to the marriage."

"Can she not marry without your consent?"

Had I proposed the assassination of the

Czar he could scarcely have looked more horrified.

"If you knew Russia, Mr. Carstairs, you would not ask," he said with the air of a judge sentencing me to be hanged. "Your position in the matter has of course been explained. When Mirla reached home last night—you know she refuses to live with us—she found the letter from your cousin, and this was shown to me. Your position is a somewhat delicate one; and probably you will not care to remain long in Minsk under the circumstances."

Pretty cool, this. Count Otto over again from a different point of view. "Representing my cousin, Prince, I must of course have—the Countess's decision from herself."

"You heard me tell her to remain," he said. "Tell her—." He little thought how the words grated.

"Shall I see her at once? If she does not wish to marry my cousin there's an end of it."

"There is one thing I should tell you. We are practically certain that Mirla has no affection for your relative—not that it would make any difference if she had. By we, I mean my wife and I—and women understand women better than we men do. We think that the betrothal was rather intended as the sign of rebellion against our authority. That, of course, we cannot countenance. We shall not—under any conceivable circumstances,"—he repeated as he rose. "And now that you

understand our position, I will send her to you."

"Let the prisoner be brought in," was distinctly in his tone and manner.

Ye gods, what a mix up it was! My mind was a maelstrom of conflicting thoughts as I paced up and down the room waiting for the "prisoner." Some five minutes elapsed before she came; and as she entered I guessed by the expression of her face that she had had her temper tried considerably since arriving at the house.

She closed the door behind her, and there was a flush of resentment on her cheeks and a dash of anger in her eyes as she stood and looked very steadily at me.

"Is it true that I have been entirely mistaken in you?"

The question came so suddenly and was of so unexpected a nature that I started. "That depends entirely upon what you thought first and what you think now."

"You saved me yesterday from serious trouble at Britski; and you have saved my life to-day here in Minsk."

"Please say no more about that."

"Prince Volonesh has told you all about me."

"He has told me something."

"And you are leaving Minsk to-night, or at latest, to-morrow?"

"I? Why, I am only just beginning to enjoy myself."

Her expression changed on the instant.

Her eyes smiled first and then her lips. "I was sure of you. You saved my life. I must," she cried in answer to my gesture of protest. "And having saved it you will make it worth living. You will help me, won't you, Mr. Carstairs? You will; I know you will;" and impulsively she put both her hands into mine and looked pleadingly into my eyes.

A pretty turn to the situation, this. She little guessed the hot words that leapt to my lips at the touch of her hands and the appeal of her eyes.

For a moment I could scarcely control myself. Then I managed to stammer, as I let her hands fall: "I think we had better talk it over. And please believe that I am entirely your friend."

CHAPTER IV

THE LITTLE ANARCHIST

I PLACED a chair for Mirla, but she chose one nearer the window. "I would rather sit here. I can watch your face. This interview is more to me than you think." There was no appeal in her eyes now : brisk capacity, resolve and self-confidence, rather.

"How shall we begin ?" I asked.

She laughed. "Do you know what they call me here ?—'The Little Anarchist.' Partly—the jest part—because my name is the same as that of a well-known anarchist, and partly—this is the earnest—because I will not do what the family dictate."

"The 'Little Anarchist,' " I repeated, with a smile.

"I know," she cried quickly. "You saw the news of her escape in that paper yesterday, and wondered if it was really an anarchist you had to escort to England. I wish I had known who you were, I would have played the part. But I never guessed—even when you said you were English. You see I had not then had your cousin's letter, and I was not expecting you." Then with a very shrewd glance she added : "Why did not your cousin himself come ?"

“Did he not tell you he had met with an accident?”

“A slight accident! Would that prevent him for ever?”

I thought of the reference to Ascot and shut down a smile. “It would be possible to wire him to come as soon as possible. Indeed, that might be the best course.”

“Why?”

“Well, there seems to be a pretty considerable tangle to be straightened out here.”

“And you think he is more capable of straightening it than you? I know him better than that. Is he tired of the betrothal to me?”

“My dear Countess——”

“Oh, not Countess, please,” she cried, her forehead crinkling as she shook her head vigorously. “When I marry Sir Andrew we shall be cousins; and cousins in Russia do not say Countess and Mister.”

“Well, then, cousin—cousin Mirla.”

“Yes,” she assented. “Cousin Ri—Richard.” She stumbled over the pronunciation and made a little wry face. “Oh, that ‘ch!’ It is more difficult than Mister.”

“Every one calls me Dick.”

She set her head on one side, tried it over to herself, laughed and said: “That’s better. It’s not pretty, but easy. Well, cousin—Dick—is he tired of the betrothal?”

“I can’t imagine why you even ask such a thing!”

“He was to come to Minsk nine months

ago ; and did not come. Then, six months ago ; and did not come. Then, three months ago ; and did not come. And now—he sends you. Except those letters of excuses, he has written me two letters in six months. Is this your cold English custom ? ”

“ This time I was close at hand—at Königsberg with my yacht, and it——”

“ You have a yacht ? ” she broke in sharply, almost eagerly.

“ Oh, yes ; I call her the *Falcon*. He proposed I should take you to England in her.”

She laughed and clapped her hands. “ How lovely ! ” Then : “ How far from our frontier ? ”

“ About a hundred miles—say two hundred from Vilna.”

“ You are keeping the yacht there ? ”

“ Of course—waiting for me. To be frank, I expected that you would be ready to start almost at once upon my arrival here, and that I should be back there in three or four days.”

“ And you will take all this trouble for me ? ”

“ I don’t call it trouble. Besides, Sir Andrew is my cousin, and his promised wife may surely count on me to help her in any way.”

“ Ah, his ‘ promised wife,’ of course. A good reason.” A pause, then suddenly : “ Suppose I were not his promised wife, but just a girl in sad trouble here, would you help me ? ”

“ My dear Coun—Little Anarchist. You *are* his promised wife, and I could not play at

supposing anything else. But believe this—I will do all in my power for you. If you wish to go to England to marry my cousin, you shall go if I can get you there ”

She gave me a long serious steady look without a word ; then the eyes showed signs of a smile. “ I do wish to go, Mr. Carstairs, as your cousin’s promised wife.”

“ That settles it so far as I am concerned. You shall go. When will you be ready to start ? ”

“ Ah, that is the man who saved me at Britski. If your cousin wishes me to leave Russia, he did well to send you in his place.”

“ You mean there will be difficulties raised. I expect them.”

“ Do you know what they have determined I shall do ? ”

“ I know they have determined you shall not make this marriage.”

“ I mean the one I am to make—with Count Otto.” My expression must have reflected my thoughts. “ He is all you may think him and more. I detest him ; and no power on earth shall make me marry him.”

“ Surely they cannot force you ? ”

“ The Prince might not—his wife would : and Count Otto would do anything. He has squandered his fortune and covets mine. In a way your coming will bring things to a crisis. Up to now I have held them all at bay by my betrothal ; a sort of armed neutrality ; but now it will be open war But—I have you now to help me.”

"We'll do what we can, together," I said after a pause.

"A compact?" was the reply, and she held out her hand.

"Yes, a compact. My word on it."

There was another pause; longer this time, then she said: "You will have a bitter enemy in Count Otto. He was like a mad-man just now when the Princess told him who you were."

"I don't know that he can do me any harm. But let us make our plans. When will you be ready to leave?"

Before the question was answered, Prince Volonesh entered.

"I hope I have given you long enough," he said courteously.

"Thank you, yes. There is nothing to be discussed which you need not know. The Countess has told me that she wishes to go to England to marry my cousin, and as you entered I was asking her when she would be ready to leave."

He frowned sternly. "You know that you cannot go, Mirla; and that this marriage is impossible."

"That is saying too much. I know that you are all opposed to my marriage—and I am sorry—but that is not the same thing as impossible." There was no mistaking the resolute defiance in tone and manner.

"And do you set yourself against us?"

"Why do you and the Princess seek to force me to marry a man I detest—Count

Otto ? I *will* go to England and I *will* marry whom I choose."

"A man who does not even think it worth while to come and fetch you."

"Your pardon, Prince. Sir Andrew Carstairs is my relative."

"Oh, forgive me," he said hastily. "But this thing moves me more than I can say. I meant no disrespect to him personally, Mr. Carstairs ; and referred only to the lack of care for Mirla which he appears to have shown. I forgot too, in the heat of the moment, that he is hurt. But you may know he was to have come on several previous occasions."

"The Countess has told me. But you will remember that I said to you in this matter I could only be guided by her own decision."

"Well, only one thing remains. I have no power actually to prevent this marriage, but Mirla cannot leave the country."

"I can get the Czar's leave," she cried.

"You can ask for it ; but it will not be granted. Mirla, as Countess Gorkov, is the owner of an estate granted to her ancestors by a former Czar," he explained to me, "and one of the conditions of tenure is that the owner of the estate cannot leave the country without the permission of the reigning Emperor."

"Is it more than a mere form ?"

The Prince smiled significantly. "Ordinarily, no more than a form, of course ; but—well, not always so. As head of the family I shall oppose it. You had better apply for the

permission, Mirla ; and in the meantime the matter will wait. You can if you think it of any use, go on with your preparations in the meantime ;” and from his manner it was easy to see that this was a very strong move, check—if not checkmate.

But Mirla refused to regard the threat seriously. She rose with a laugh and shook hands with me. “ I shall be ready to go with you in three days, at latest, Mr. Carstairs. Shall we cry a truce, Prince, until the reply comes from Petersburg ? ”

“ You should not force me, Mirla,” he answered.

“ The Little Father will not refuse me. You will see ; ” and with that she left us.

The Prince frowned as the door closed behind her, but the next moment he tossed up his hands and smiled. “ It is a pity. She is a splendid girl—but wilful. And now I can guess what is in your thoughts, Mr. Carstairs, and know how you feel. We are on opposite sides in this matter ; but that can make no difference to my obligation to you.”

“ I think, with your permission, I had better return to my hotel.”

“ With my permission, certainly not. I concede that you can do no other than attempt to carry out your cousin’s request—but Mirla will not be allowed to leave. Let us take her cue, therefore—cry a truce until that is settled. Indeed, I have arranged it. Your man is already in your rooms here. You will use my house exactly as if it were your own. I beg

you. Let me at least see to your safety and comfort while you are here. You saved my life, remember."

He pressed me so urgently that at length I consented to remain for that day at any rate.

A suite of four rooms was placed at my disposal: two sitting-rooms and a bedroom, with a room for Parker; servants were told off to wait upon me, and everything possible was done to show that I was regarded as a guest of honour. But I felt far from comfortable. I was in a sense conspiring against my host; and although he knew it perfectly well, it did not make my position less awkward.

At dinner time the Prince and his wife did their utmost to set me at ease. Count Otto was there and was almost aggressively anxious to show his desire to be on friendly terms.

Not a word was said about Mirla until in the salon later the Princess spoke of her. I think the other two had left us alone intentionally. She was a most magnetic companion. Many of our tastes were in common. She had travelled all over Europe; was cultured, well read and artistic; and she sang far better than the average professional. For more than an hour she kept me engrossed with quaint weird folk songs of Russia, Hungary and Germany.

"Now a word about our Little Anarchist, Mr. Carstairs. I am not going to tread on forbidden ground. All I want to say is this. The Prince tells me that you had some reluct-

ance about staying here, because of her. But you will not let that drive you away ? ”

“ I am in a way conspiring against you, Princess.”

“ A terrible conspirator who has saved my husband’s life. You will stay ? ” She laid her hand on my arm and bent her large dark eyes on me as though she were pleading for some great favour. “ Surely you will not deny us the chance of showing a little of our gratitude.”

“ Will you let me hold my decision until to-morrow ? ”

“ Ah, you English. So cold, so calculating, so unresponsive. I suppose we bore you.”

“ Princess ! ”

“ Then stay,” she said, almost caressingly. “ We forgive you your conspiracy, we do not ask you to change sides. But stay.”

“ I should be a churl to refuse,” I said, regretting the decision even as I made it.

“ Ah, Russia has won a victory over England. We will have a song of triumph ; ” and she burst into the Russian National Anthem, smiling at me as she sang.

Why was she so anxious for me to stay ? She had not been when I had first arrived at the house. I was not coxcomb enough to put it down to any reasons personal to myself. I did not believe it was because of my act of the morning. Why was it then ? I was pondering this when a letter was brought to me.

Wondering who in Minsk could write to me

I broke the seal and found to my surprise it was from Mirla.

"DEAR MR. CARSTAIRS,—

"I have triumphed. I telegraphed to Petersburg to-day and have received the reply 'Permission granted. Formal papers will be posted to-morrow'. Say nothing yet to the Prince. I shall be ready to start the moment the papers arrive—the day after to-morrow, that is. My aunt who lives with me, Countess Ribolsk, will travel with us. Will your yacht hold so many? You can imagine how I feel at the prospect. Will you make all arrangements for the journey?

Ever yours,—

"MIRLA GORKOV."

I laid the letter down with something like a chortle. She was a plucky little soul indeed, and deserved to win, and—well, Andrew was a lucky fellow.

With something uncommonly like a sigh I rose and went through my inner sitting-room to the bedroom beyond to get a time-table from my bag. I could not find it for a while and was returning with it when I heard a sound, like the faint crackle of a paper in the room I had left, followed by the rustle of some one moving quickly.

Almost at the same instant there was a knock at the door and my name was called in Count Otto's voice. When I entered he was

standing well inside the open entrance door, looking rather confused.

"Oh, there you are. I was afraid you were not in."

"Did you call me ? "

"Just this moment as I opened the door."

"Oh, come in, come in."

He came in, closed the door behind him, and he seemed scrupulously careful not to approach the table. I was, of course, suspicious of him and the action looked like overplayed fastidiousness about seeing any of the open papers on my table. Then I saw the reason.

Mirla's letter was not lying where I had left it : but just where it might have fallen had some one tossed it down hurriedly when darting back to the door.

He was not clever at the game ; or had been hurried.

Here was one reason at least, why they might wish me to remain in the house.

CHAPTER V

“ WHO IS YOUR ENEMY ? ”

THE incident of the letter produced a very disquieting effect upon me. I was quite certain that Count Otto had read it. His manner was proof enough for me. He had come apparently to make peace with me ; was delighted to hear I was to stay on in the house ; professed himself most anxious to have my friendship, and remove the impression created by his visit to the hotel ; would I oblige him by saying how he could serve me : and so on with much more to the like effect.

But at the same time he was very restless and fidgety ; and every now and then he would shoot at me quick glances of nervous scrutiny. I read the latter to mean that he would have given much to know whether I suspected him ; and the former that he was keen to get away with the news he had learnt.

What use would he make of it ? To whom was he to escape to tell it ? Whose was the guiding hand in the matter ? Was it the Prince or the Princess ? To ask the question was to answer it. It was the Princess. Her change of manner to me was proof enough.

The reason for her urgent wish for me to remain in the house was, no doubt, to have me under close observation. Under the same roof surrounded by her spies, my every act could be observed, my movements reported, my letters intercepted, even my personal safety threatened.

I had heard of Russian hospitality of the same kind before. But for Count Otto's blunder I should have had no suspicion. I was on my guard now, however; and was confident I could act as well as she, and far better than Count Otto.

What would they do in the face of Mirla's letter? They would not tamely submit. That was certain. What *could* they do? There was another question—Why were they so dead set upon Count Otto's marriage with Mirla?

That she had money did not seem to cover it. There were plenty of girls with money who would be glad to marry a man so good looking as he was, with youth and rank as well.

I lay awake half the night wrestling with those two questions in the light of Mirla's words—that my arrival had brought matters to a crisis.

Whatever they meant to do would be done at once; and I must therefore see Mirla the next morning and tell her the incident of the letter.

Breakfast was served to me in my own rooms and the servant who brought it told

me that the Princess always breakfasted alone in her room ; that Count Otto had gone away into the country ; and that the Prince had already gone out on urgent business. He had left word that he advised me not to venture out on foot alone, and that his stables were entirely at my disposal.

I resolved also to leave the Prince's house that day, and sent Parker to the *Kaiserhof* to engage rooms. I was just finishing my breakfast when he returned with a very strange story. All the hotels were too full to receive me ; and as in two cases the fact had only been discovered after my name had been mentioned, he had gone back to the *Kaiserhof* to try and learn the reason.

M. Bernhoff had at first professed to know nothing. On being pressed, however, he had admitted that there was plenty of room in the hotel but that he could not take the risk of having me there. " If the fact were known," he declared, " the hotel would be sacked. Tell your master that if he values his life the sooner he is out of the city the better. I would not take him here for a thousand roubles a day—nor will any one else in Minsk."

Parker was as much frightened as I was puzzled. I was inclined rather to laugh at the incident and took it no more seriously than the Prince's warning—not to venture out on foot. But if I could not go to any hotel I must remain where I was. That was clear.

The Prince's warning I could easily test ;

and accordingly I started to walk to Mirla's house, and resolved to call at the *Kaiserhof* on the way, to question M. Bernhoff.

But I had not gone a hundred yards before I found that a man was following me, and as soon as I had turned the first corner he quickened his pace. I slowed up and when he was within a yard or two I faced round and waited.

“Mr. Carstairs,” he said as he stopped.

“Well, what is it?”

“You don't know me?”

“Good heavens. Andreas Viralmi! You?”

I exclaimed in intense astonishment as I recognized in him a young fellow I had known four or five years before in Vilna. I held out my hand.

“Yes, Andreas Viralmi,” he replied, not taking my hand.

“You don't see my hand,” said I quietly.

“You might not offer it if you knew. I am one of the strike leaders.”

“We English don't turn our backs on a friend, Viralmi, just because his political views change. Come, shake hands and don't make my arm ache; there's a good fellow.”

He appeared to be touched by this and, after a pause, wrung my hand with a warm grasp. Then with a somewhat apprehensive glance he said: “I want to speak to you—I must, indeed. Will you trust me? I swear to God I won't betray you.”

“Of course I will.”

“Then walk on ahead of me. Take the fourth turning on the left—Rostov Street—

go to the end and turn to the right: the twelfth house on the right-hand side. I must follow you."

Considerably mystified I did as he wished and walked on speculating very curiously on the reason for his extraordinary conduct; and how he had found out my presence in Minsk.

Absorbed by these thoughts I reached the middle of the street he had named, when a young woman at the gate of a corner house on the opposite side stared hard at me and then dashed across and spoke my name.

"Half Minsk seems to know me," thought I. But at a closer glance I recognized her as the young Jewess who had been rescued at the *Kaiserhof* on the previous night.

"I could not rest without thanking you, sir. Would to heaven it were in my power to show my gratitude. But for you I should never have seen to-day."

"You must thank M. Bernhoff, not me," I said.

"No, no, I know him. He thinks of his hotel, not of the life of a poor Jewess. It was you. I went to the hotel this morning to ask for you; and he thrust me from the door as though I had been dirt."

It is always awkward to answer rhapsodies. "Well, I am glad you are safe. Do you live here?"

"I am servant to Father Tesla—the priest. But he does not know I am not a Christian. I was home last night; oh, God, I cannot



“ A young woman . . . dashed across, and spoke my name.”

The Little Anarchist]

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think of it. My mother and brother were both killed, and I put on my dead brother's clothes to escape. Why is heaven so hard to us Jews.”

“It isn't heaven, my girl, it's Russia. You would like to leave the country?”

“Oh, sir, they will kill me if I stay. Every day, every hour, every minute I am looking for the knout or the knife.”

“Well, I won't forget you and will see what can be done. I am staying with Prince Volonesh——”

“Count Otto Zuloff lives there. You are his friend?” and she drew away from me as if in disgust.

“There is some story behind that,” I said.

“It is my sister's story. Let him tell it you.”

“He's not likely to do anything of the kind—I am not exactly his friend.”

She seized my arm and peered with eager shining eyes into my face. “Can you help me to revenge?”

“If I can help you to leave Russia I will. Now go, please.”

She still gripped my arm and stared at me with the same tense, searching expression. Then very gradually she smiled and her eyes filled with tears. “I have a friend at last, thank God;” and turning quickly from me, she hurried across the street, leaving me to continue my way more mystified than ever.

When I reached the house which had been described, I halted and Viralmi came up,

looking anxiously about him in all directions before he opened the door. Then he hurried me inside, closed it behind us, and led me up a flight of stairs into a neatly, but severely furnished room that might have been the study of a scholar. I glanced round at the many books, the pictures on the walls, the writing desk, the open evidences of study, and then at him.

"Still a student, Viralmi?"

He thrust his white fingers through his hair, pushing it off his white square forehead—he was a striking-looking fellow—and fixed his black eyes on me "Not a student now, monsieur—a practitioner."

"Of course. It's five or six years, isn't it? How one forgets. You are much changed, yet I ought to have recognized your eyes. They are your mother's. I see her portrait there. She is well?"

"She is dead, monsieur."

"Oh, pardon me. I did not know—It must have cut you, for I know how you loved her."

He turned from me and fingered some papers on his desk, as though the mention of her had agitated him.

"And your sister?" I asked, after a pause.

"She too is dead, monsieur. Both were murdered."

"Murdered! How horrible. Forgive me for having touched on this."

"It is not the mention of their death that disturbs me—it is never out of my thoughts—

but this meeting with you who knew them. It is their death and the burning resolve to avenge them which has made me what I am.”

“Do you care to tell me?” I asked, as I sat down.

“I should like to. You know how you found us at Vilna, starving under the persecution of the villain, Baron Pultowski, who sought by that means to drive my sister to yield to his infamous proposals. It was your friendship and help alone which saved us all from the pit of hell which that devil mined under our feet.” He had not sat down, but paced up and down the room, with many signs of nervous excitement.

“Never mind what I did; you left Vilna and went to Smolensk to study law.”

“And for two years all went well with us. My sister and I earned enough to keep our mother and I was soon to graduate when that devil found us out. I swear to you, monsieur, I had never had a thought of turning revolutionary, but like other students I went to meetings to listen; then a rising came—a trifling affair, easily suppressed—but it was enough for him.”

“Ah, I begin to see,” I murmured.

“He got me proscribed; our little home was raided; I was not taken, but my sister was again in his power. He was rich and an aristocrat; the government was behind him; and he could make his terms. Her acquiescence or my mother’s life and hers. She yielded; and when his fancy faded, a fresh

charge, false as hell, was brought, and both—were executed.”

“ Could such a thing be possible ? ” I cried, deeply moved.

He turned to me, his pale face hard set with intense feeling, his large dark eyes aglow. “ Possible ? It is the routine of this Government by bureaucracy, such infamies, differing of course in detail, are the common happenings where the rich are the rulers and the workers and the poor are only slaves. Do you wonder that I am what I am ? I ask you that, because but for that devil, you would have helped me to a very different career.”

“ And Pultowski ? ”

His face was transformed almost out of knowledge by a look of deadly hate. “ Do you think I let him live ? After the murder of my dear ones, I swore to devote my life to two objects—vengeance upon him and revenge against the government he had been able to use as his accomplice. I disguised myself, entered his service, became his valet, even gained his confidence and chose a moment when he was on the verge of marrying a woman he loved, or coveted, which you will, to tell him who I was and sheathe my knife in his coward’s heart.”

He paused but I said nothing.

“ Does silence mean censure ? ” he asked.

“ It is not for me to judge you, Viralmi ; I can only thank heaven I have never been tried in a fire so fierce as that.”

“ Then I joined the revolutionary party ;

and heaven be thanked I have been able, young as I am, to make my blows felt against the Government and for the people's cause. You can judge by my story why we Russians are revolutionaries to-day, and why so many of us—we who have suffered, each in his degree—are motivated by this grim fierce earnestness. It is all I live for now.”

“Yours is a fearful story, Viralmi,” I said, after a long pause.

“I have told you all. No other man in the world knows or even suspects that my hand killed Pultowski. But I owed it to you to tell you the truth, for what you did for us. And now I can perhaps repay some of my debt.”

“How did you know I was in Minsk?” I asked.

“You don't know?” he cried in manifest astonishment. “You are the man who tore the bomb from Peter Basi's hands.”

“Who is Peter Basi?”

“A name you should remember. Look here;” and putting a newspaper into my hand he pointed to a boldly-headed paragraph, in which the affair of the bomb was described. My name was given in full with the following description, which I read not without some interest:

“Richard Carstairs, the hero of the affair, is, as his name tells, an Englishman. He is above the middle height; very upright; spare in figure but very muscular; complexion

tanned by open air ; eyes blue ; looks at you with resolute searching fixity ; nose slightly arched on bridge ; lips thin, and suggesting determination ; chin square and heavy ; moustache darker than hair : no whiskers or beard : age about twenty-five to twenty-eight. Dress, a tweed suit ; upstanding double collar ; knot tie ; hat, hard felt. He speaks Russian with no English accent."

" You bewilder me ! " I exclaimed.

" That description of Richard Carstairs was in our hands last night. Part of it was in the evening papers yesterday, wrapped up in a eulogy of your act, and stating that you had been to the *Kaiserhof* and now were living with Prince Volonesh. They make a hero of you against the strikers. You have a cunning enemy somewhere in Minsk, monsieur, who knows how to go to work."

" You mean I am a marked man ? "

" I mean that. I got myself told off to watch you. If it were to be known that I had had you here alone in this room and let you go, I should—well, it might cost me my life."

I sat thinking hard. I don't pretend that I was not very considerably disturbed.

" Who is your enemy ? Is it that priest—rascal—Father Tesla ? "

" Father Tesla ? "

" Yes, it was his house that girl came from. If he's the man, beware of him. He is a double-faced scamp. In league with both

sides—strikers and authorities : with half a hundred villainies to his account.”

“I have never seen the man in my life’ never even heard of him until just now.”

“Then who is it? There is somebody. This is no accident;” and he held up the paper.

“The only other man I can even think of is Count Otto Zulloff; but——”

“Then it is Tesla for a million roubles,” he broke in quickly. “They run in double harness those two. The priest has helped the Count in a dozen vilenesses. We have his record. When I first came to this place I earned my bread as a copyist in a lawyer’s office, and there, by chance I found out that he had robbed a girl—the girl he intends to marry too—of nearly a hundred thousand roubles, and Tesla helped him.”

“The Countess Mirla Gorkov?”

“Of course. Is this anything to you?” he asked, struck by my tone, I think.

“Yes, a great deal.”

“I have papers with particulars that will enable you to prove it. I got them at the time, thinking they might be useful to the cause. You can have them. They may pay part of my debt to you.”

“We’ll call that square,” I said, as I took them.

“No, I shall never forget; but I can give you another instalment—a warning. Go away from Minsk—right clear away—and out of the country if you can. But disguise

yourself ; for I declare to you on my soul your life will be in peril every hour you stay in this city. Your name is on the death list."

"I expect to leave to-morrow."

"To-day would be better, for reasons I cannot tell you without betraying my comrades. But if you cannot go until then, shut yourself in Prince Volonesh's house. You may be safe there. May—for the strikers have friends everywhere ; and I've said enough to warn you about Count Otto. Don't leave the house unless you are disguised, and not even then on foot. As an Englishman you may laugh at all this. But I am a Russian and behind the scenes. You must go now. My last word is—leave Russia at once ; and I have risked much, believe me, to say it."

We went downstairs and, after he made certain that we were not to be watched, he let me out. I hurried back to the Prince Volonesh's house, thankful to reach it safely, and fervently wished I could take his advice and get Mirla away at once.

I was more shaken by his warning than I cared to acknowledge, even to myself.

CHAPTER VI

A NEW USE FOR A BOOBY TRAP

I FOUND Mirla waiting in the great pillared hall of the Prince's house.

"Thank God you have come. I have been walking up and down here in a fever of anxiety. Are you mad?" She smiled as she gave her me hand, but her manner and tone were intensely earnest.

"I was not when I left England. But what have I done now?"

"You have seen how the papers speak of your act yesterday, what they say of you, and the description they add."

"A friend showed me the last."

"Did he not tell you it was madness to be alone on foot in the streets after that?"

"Yes, indeed, he did. That is why I have come back. I was going to see you."

"A friend? You have friends in Minsk?"

"I have friends all over the Continent."

"You have enemies also. One of them has done this?"

"Presumably some enterprising pressman."

She shook her head impatiently. "You know better. How could a pressman know what you did at Britski?"

I started. "I did not know that was mentioned."

"It is, in one report. A coward's hand is in this. I have not had a moment's peace since I read it ; and I rushed here to tell you that you must leave Minsk at once. And when I heard you were out on foot alone I—I was like a mad—I—oh, I never passed two such hours in my life."

"I have been in no danger, I assure you. Indeed, I have done much good, I think. The friend I mentioned just now is one of the strike leaders, and he told me things." I spoke very quietly. "But if I leave, what of you ?"

"Would you have me think of myself at such a time ? Mr. Carstairs !" Her eyes lighted in indignant repudiation.

"Would you have *me* think of nothing but myself ? Countess Mirla !" I replied with a smile, imitating her manner. I wished to impress upon her that I refused to take things too seriously.

She looked at me for a moment, her brow puckered, then with a stamp of the foot she said, with a charming air of authority : "You will leave Minsk to-day."

"Very well. We'll take that for granted. Now as to yourself ?"

"I shall certainly follow to-morrow, with my aunt, as I wrote you. They cannot stop me. The permit and passports will be here to-morrow."

"Have you told them here ?"

"No. I shall not until I am on the point of starting."

"I am afraid they know. I was coming to you to-day about it;" and I told her of the incident of Count Otto's visit to my room and my belief that he had seen her letter.

Her face fell and she pursed her lips. "I am sorry. Of course he read it. He is that sort. But it can make no difference."

"It may not with the Prince; but——" Her eyes questioned me. "Of course it does with me. I can't go until I know that you are able to leave. You see, my cousin gave me this thing to do and I shall see it through."

"You said you would go."

"I said we would take it for granted—but the conditions have altered."

"If you do not go to-day I will not go at all," she cried, quickly.

"There spoke the 'Little Anarchist.' In that case all I can do is to cable my cousin to come out himself, and remain here of course until he arrives."

Her expressive features reflected half a dozen conflicting emotions at this, but after a pause she smiled. "Are you not ashamed to bully and threaten me in this way?"

I saw an opening here and took it. "My dear—cousin, there can really be no thought of any personal feelings between you and myself. My cousin has laid a charge upon me, and I can pay regard only to the conditions of that charge." With a slight frown she

turned her head away. "Of course I am not threatening you even in jest, and certainly not bullying you ; but until I know that you are free to leave Minsk, my duty to my cousin requires me to stop here. And here I shall stop, of course."

She heard me with her look bent upon her fingers, which she was locking and unlocking quickly and nervously. "I—I think I understand : and I—thank you." But the words were scarcely out of her lips before her mood changed. She raised her head and looked at me with frank rebellion in her brightly shining eyes, and stamping her foot again, this time in defiance, she cried vehemently : "I have never been made to give in yet. You are dictating to me and you have no right. You *shall* go to-day. How do you suppose I should feel if anything happened to——" She broke off with the same abruptness. "Do you wish to make me hate myself ?"

She turned from me in some agitation, due, I think, to genuine concern for my safety. But feeling as I did toward her I dared not trust myself to answer earnestly ; so with a light laugh I replied : "If it comes to dictation, what about your 'shall' ?"

She winced at the laugh as though hurt, and half turned to retort : but checked herself ; and in the pause which followed Prince Volonesh came out into the hall.

"I am glad you are safely back, Mr. Carstairs," he said as we shook hands. Then to Mirla : "I hear you have telegraphed to

Petersburg for permission to leave Russia, Mirla."

"How did you learn it?" she asked quickly, as we went into the library.

"I am not at liberty to say. I have, however, wired my version of the affair. You should know that. I deal frankly with you."

"I have already received permission, Prince, and I leave to-morrow."

"We shall see," was his reply. "Mr. Cairstairs, you have seen the reports of yesterday's matter? Some one has done you a very ill turn in publishing your name. Your personal safety will be my especial care; but it would be idle to pretend that your position is not one of danger. Do you not think we had better get you away from Minsk at once?"

"That is what I have been urging," said Mirla.

"I propose to leave with the Countess to-morrow, or whenever she leaves."

He bowed. "It must be as you please. After your great service to me it may seem inhospitable to press you to go; but that is the greatest kindness all the same."

"Surely I am in no greater danger than yourself, Prince, or any prominent man here."

"We are Russians, Mr. Carstairs. Our duty is to remain. But let me assure you that, whether you go or stay, I will spare no effort to secure your safety. My wife will

join in that assurance," he added as the Princess entered.

She greeted me with much warmth and cordiality, expressed the deepest solicitude on my behalf, and was most voluble in her regrets at the mishap of the publicity given to my name.

"Otto was only saying last night how serious it would be if your name got known."

"How do you suppose it did get known, Molda?" asked Mirla, who had been intently watching the Princess.

"You certainly do ask the most ridiculous questions, Mirla. How is it possible that I could have even the remotest idea?"

"I wasn't speaking of a remote idea at all. But there were only three people who knew of the Britski affair—you, the Prince and Count Otto."

"Mirla! Do you see what you are insinuating?" cried the Prince, very angrily.

"Did not your favourite maid know?" asked the Princess.

"Yes, but not the name, Richard Carstairs, nor that he stopped at the *Kaiserhof*."

"This is insufferable," exclaimed the Prince.

"May we not leave my poor self alone for a while? What really matters is not who gave the information; but what I am going to do because of it."

"If what I say is insufferable, I will go," declared Mirla, rising. "But I have said no more than the truth; and it is somebody's

duty to probe it. Mr. Carstairs, the German mail leaves to-morrow afternoon. My aunt and I travel by that; but if you consult my wishes, you will leave to-day and meet us on the other side of the frontier."

"I have a word to say to you, Mirla," said the Prince, and the two left the room together.

The Princess cast a very angry look after Mirla as she left the room. Turning quickly to me she saw that I had noticed her glance, and smiled winningly as if to appeal to me.

"Isn't that too bad? Can any one help being angry at such a charge? How would you feel, Mr. Carstairs?"

"I think the crass impossibility of such a charge touching you should render you indifferent to it. If indeed it was meant as a charge."

"If? You do not know Mirla yet," she said drily. "She is very charming, very pretty, and very magnetic—but she has brains; and every woman with brains can be very unpleasant. Her object now is to set you against us. Oh, yes it is," she added with a little ring of malice in her tone, as I protested. "I know her. She does not really want to marry your cousin; she does not care a nailclipping for him. But her scheme has been opposed; and so my lady is obstinate, puts her back to the wall, sets us all at defiance and persists in it out of sheer love of strife. Not a nice disposition, is it?"

"Your pardon. I am only a neutral, Prin-

cess. At any rate one of your family, Count Otto, does not share your opinion."

"You are very discreet," she replied with another smile ; and taking a step closer she put her hand on my arm and let it linger while her eyes sought mine and held them. "I think Englishmen are the most delightful men in the world."

I would have given much to have read the thought behind the glance and the words so softly spoken. I endeavoured to draw back but she followed me a step, adding in little more than an undertone : "You do not believe I would be guilty of such treachery."

The door opened then, it had been ajar, indeed, and the Prince entered. The Princess drew away quickly and nervously as he stood looking sternly across the room at us in obvious displeasure. There were twenty years between them and his wife was displaying some confusion.

"Were you yourself to say it, Princess, I should still require strong proof," I answered.

"What is that ?" asked the Prince, with some sharpness.

"Nothing, Gregory. Just a little interchange of confidences."

But I deemed it best to state quite plainly what had been said ; and then excused myself and went to my rooms.

Only one thing of any consequence occurred that day. I passed the greater part of it in my rooms. Recalling my promise to the Jewish girl, I wrote to Mirla, telling her the circum-

stances and asking her help ; and sent it to her by Parker.

Mirla's reply was full of sympathy. Of course she would help and, if I could send the girl to her, she would make all arrangements. I dispatched Parker to Father Tesla's accordingly, to see the Jewess and tell her to go at once to Mirla.

When he returned he brought news.

"Just as I reached the parson's house that Count Otto came out with him, sir."

"Are you sure, Parker ?"

"Quite positive, swear to him, sir."

"Did he recognize you ?"

"Not in this rig out, sir." I had told him to buy a Russian dress, thinking it safer he should not run the risk of being recognized as an Englishman.

"And the girl ?"

"She is going to-night, sir, if she can get out."

"Very well."

What was Count Otto doing with the priest ? In the light of what Viralmi had told me, it might well mean mischief. I had studied very carefully the papers Viralmi had given me ; and as he had said, they afforded ample material for proving the truth of what he had said as to Count Otto having obtained a large sum of Mirla's money. And it was easy therefore to answer one of the questions which had baffled me on the previous night—why he was so eager to marry her. He wished to hush up the thing.

I was fast getting into that nervous anticipative mood which comes to most men in the early stages of a state of mental tension. I seemed to feel that trouble was in the air. I was restless and disturbed ; and ready to catch at any straw as an indication of it.

Just before the dinner hour I went down and was entering the drawing-room when I heard the Count's voice.

"To-morrow night. I tell you I couldn't manage it earlier."

I am no eavesdropper, so I pushed open the door with intentional noise and entered. The Princess and her brother were alone, and the latter started uneasily as he saw me.

"But to-morrow night won't suit me, Otto. I told you that Madame Krebold was coming. Ah, Mr. Carstairs—you at least are un-English in one thing—you are always punctual."

I was no judge if her manner and words were not intended to cover the situation ; but I murmured some reply and we all began to chat.

I might be grasping at a bubble, of course ; but I could not shake off the impression that the thing had some ugly meaning.

During the dinner the impression was strengthened almost into certainty. The Prince was much preoccupied and very irritable and spoke little. He told me rather curtly, that he had heard the permit for Mirla's journey had been granted, and that he had decided to go with her to England if she would postpone the journey for a day. He wished

to represent his side of the matter to my cousin. Then, as if the subject were to be considered closed, he turned to his wife : " By the way, Molda, I heard from the Krebold's to-day : they are returning next week."

Count Otto started so that his knife and fork dropped with a clatter. But the Princess was very ready. " Next week ? Why I thought it was to-morrow. I had it in my diary that she would be here. So I alarmed you needlessly, Otto, just now."

It was distinctly a trying moment ; indeed, the whole dinner was a trial. Only the Princess was at ease. I felt the exceeding awkwardness of the position : Count Otto was obviously uncomfortable and moody ; and the Prince sadly out of temper at the turn things had taken in regard to Mirla. I was therefore very glad when I could escape to my room.

" To-morrow night." What did it mean ? Did it affect me ? Or Mirla ? Or was it just nothing born of my own fears on Mirla's account and my enforced inactivity ?

I would have given a good deal for half an hour's searching chat with Count Otto ; but he did not come near me.

I have always believed a subtle sense is possessed by some of us which will at times give warning of danger. I had had evidence of it more than once in my own case, in a not unadventurous life—and the feeling was strong upon me then ; and in this moody, apprehensive, fanciful condition I turned into bed.

I could only sleep fitfully. And once in my tossing spells of wakefulness I thought I heard a sound in the room where I usually sat. A faint rustle of papers, a stealthy shuffle of soft shoes.

Noiselessly I slipped out of bed and crept across to the door and listened intently. I had locked the outer doors of the rooms but those leading from room to room were open.

Certainly some one was in the farther sitting room.

I opened the bedroom door very gently indeed, to prevent it creaking and started to cross the intervening rooms, when I knocked against a chair and down went a tray and some glass with a noisy crash.

Pausing only a second in my surprise I ran on into the other room.

But it was empty. I got a light ; but not a sign was there of any one having been there. Nothing was disturbed ; and the fastening of the door was just as I had left it, except that the key of the door lay on the carpet.

I should have put the whole thing down to imagination but for the two materialistic facts : the fallen key ; and the chair set right in the line from the bedroom door with the tray of glass carefully placed so as to fall and give warning at the least touch.

Ingenious and yet clumsy Very much like the work of such a man as Count Otto.

I made no more effort to sleep that night.

CHAPTER VII

A DRESS REHEARSAL

I HAD just finished my breakfast on the following morning when Count Otto came in. He appeared to be in a jaunty mood—with a sort of resign-yourself-to-the-worst air as a foil.

“I’m the bearer of news that is good for you, Mr. Carstairs, and bad for me, worse luck.”

“You seem to be in good spirits over it all the same.”

“Oh, confound it, it’s no use grizzling in this world. You have beaten us. Mirla goes to England and the Prince goes with her. Start to-morrow instead of to-day—that’s the only difference.”

“I heard that at dinner last night.”

“Yes, but it’s settled now. Mirla has put off going for a day. I wonder she gave way even so far—and that’s the truth. So you’ve beaten us all, you see.

“I have not beaten you. It is no victory of mine.”

He laughed and shrugged his shoulders. “We think it so. But it don’t matter. After all, as good fish in the sea, I suppose.”

“You take it philosophically,” I said.

I was speculating why he thought it necessary to try and make me believe that he had given up all thought of winning Mirla.

"Why not? We Russians have had to learn lately to know when we're beaten. I didn't come to talk about that, however. It's almost taboo in this house now. My sister wants to know whether you would care for a long ride into the country. Better than being cooped up in the house all day—and the town isn't particularly safe for you. She is going and would be glad if you would join her."

Did they wish me to be out of Minsk? "I should like it above all things, but unfortunately I have some important letters I must write and, for another thing, I had a very sleepless night. Perhaps this strikers' business got on my nerves; anyhow, I dreamt I heard some one in this room and came out to see what it meant when I fell over a chair and upset a tray of glasses."

"And woke, of course," he said, with a none too easy smile.

"Of course. And the oddest part was that I had actually upset a tray of glasses and broken them."

"Broken slumber that, eh, by Jove!" he laughed. "But you needn't have fancies of that sort in this house, I assure you. We look after our safety too closely. Did you miss anything?"

"No."

"I didn't think Englishmen were so easily

scared. Well, I'll tell my sister you won't go with her."

"Not won't, please: cannot."

"Same thing in different terms, isn't it? But I wouldn't venture out, if I were you. It's no dream fancy, the danger for you outside."

"Had there been a slight sign of relief when I had answered in the negative his casual question if I had missed anything? I thought so; but then I was getting very fanciful. I was out looking for trouble as the American phrase has it, and finding evidences of it everywhere in trifles.

As soon as he left me I sent Parker with a letter to Mirla asking her if she had postponed her departure until the next day, and she answered my letter in person. My pulses quickened as I hurried down to her, but I had myself well under restraint.

"Can you guess why I have come?" she asked me, with a bewitching smile, as she gave me both her hands. "It is to ask you to do me a great favour."

"That need not make you so worried and anxious." I was concerned at her troubled look.

"You can help to ease my worry."

"How?"

"The Prince will go with me to England, if I will wait until to-morrow."

"You have consented, they tell me. I think you are right."

"You are so—so formal," she exclaimed

irrelevantly. She little guessed what the formality covered.

I smiled. "I am sorry, but I am English, you know."

"You are not a bit like the Mr. Carstairs who helped me at Britski. Your very expression has changed."

"A good deal has happened since then."

"I believe he would have done what I want you to do now—give me an unconditional promise to do what I ask."

"I don't like unconditional promises."

"There you go. Will you give it? Do, please;" and there was a pleading look in her eyes very good to look at, and very difficult to resist.

"With one exception—yes," I said.

"I won't have any exceptions," she cried with a smile and a tap of the foot.

"I'll name it in advance. Don't ask me to leave until you go and I'll do anything in the world for you." I had not meant to say it quite so earnestly; and at my tone and look her eyes fell. A pause followed, embarrassing to me.

She toyed nervously with the handle of her sunshade, and when she raised her head I saw to my astonishment the signs of tears in her smiling eyes. "Of course, that is just what it is," she said. Then came one of her sudden changes. She rose and, facing me, stamped her foot quite vehemently. "You can't care a bit for my anxiety, or you would do it."

"Perhaps that is the best reason we can give for it," I said quietly.

"If you cared a jot, you would go," this very resentfully.

Then an impulse seized me which perhaps I ought to have resisted. But I did not. "I will change that condition. I will go——"

"Good." She broke in eagerly. "We will join you anywhere you like on the other side of the frontier."

"Wait a moment. There is still a condition. I will go if you will give me your word of honour that, if our relations were reversed, you would go."

She tried to laugh the question away. "What are our relations?"

"You know what I If——"

"I do not know why you persist in staying on here in danger."

"If you were a man in my place and I a woman in yours—you do know what I mean—would you go then?"

There was a second's pause, then a little defiant toss back of the head, and she said "I should go."

"On your honour? That was the stipulation."

She made the effort. "Yes: on my—How dare you question my word?"

"I do not. I know you better. If you could really think me such a coward or could be such a coward yourself, you would not be—well, I should think very differently of you."

"I have failed. I didn't hope to succeed,"

she said after a pause. "But you have taken the sting out of the failure. To know your reason is almost as good as to have succeeded. But I warn you, you will fill me with pride if you say such things to me. I must go. I have a hundred things to do."

"About the Jewess?"

"Rachel Vologda. Yes, we will get her away. She will travel as my maid: my own won't face the trip in the yacht. Can you let her know somehow that we start to-morrow and not to-day. You will not venture out to-day? I suppose you'll promise so much?"

"I'll promise to take good care of myself any way," I laughed, as we shook hands.

"It is no laughing matter. I could not sleep last night; and shall not have a moment's peace until you are well across the frontier."

"That will be to-morrow night, then. I am quite a nuisance to you. I am not used to having people lose their sleep over me, I assure you."

She was passing out as I spoke and paused to turn and look at me. "What, is there no one in England, then, man or—or woman, who cares?"

"Not a soul. But I hope there will be when my cousin has his charming wife."

Her forehead puckered, and she bit her lip, as the colour rushed to her face and waned as rapidly. "Yes, I—I think I can say that," she said quickly, and with a sweet little laugh, as she turned and hurried away.

I went back to my rooms in a very thoughtful frame of mind. It was an excellent arrangement that the Prince should be going with us to England ; most opportune, most expedient, most desirable in every way : and yet I wished he had been at Timbuctoo before the plan had occurred to him.

And that in its way just reflects my thoughts about Mirla as I fooled about with pen and papers pretending to write letters which remained unstarted, and trying to keep Mirla's eyes, and Mirla's voice, and Mirla's witching self out of my mind.

If only I had been at Carlsbad a year before, instead of big game hunting in Colorado ! And if only I were not here in Andrew's stead now and bound in honour not to——oh, those tantalising 'ifs.'

I sent Parker with the message to Rachel Vologda ; and he was so long absent and was, in his quiet way, so full of his praises of her on his return, that I guessed he admired her dark eyes."

"She goes to England with us, Parker."

"Yes, sir." This with unmistakable pleasure.

"She is rather pretty, you know. You must be careful."

He coughed behind his hand, rather sheepishly. "You might say very, sir. She is going as maid to the Countess, sir."

"Oh, all right !"

"She'd go through fire and water for you, sir. She told me so."

"She's been telling you other things, hasn't she, judging by the time you've been. But you often go through water for me in the *Falcon*, so there's a bond of sympathy between you. I hope she's a better sailor than you are, though."

"I hope so too, with all my heart, sir." And the thought of the sea killed his decorous laugh at my very feeble joke.

I spent the afternoon in making a necessary preparation for my journey. I had not forgotten Viralmi's warning to use some disguise in which to leave the city; and I sent Parker out therefore to procure me some kind of Russian costume.

"I don't care what it is," I told him "Any ordinary working man's clothes will do. And if you can get hold of a natural looking false beard, bring it. You know all about such things."

He was really clever in matters of the sort, having once been dresser to a leading English character actor; and I had often had experience of his deftness in making me up for private theatricals. These had once been a great weakness of mine; and in common with most amateurs I had at one time been fully convinced that if I chose to go on the stage, all the other characters would have instantly been compelled to admit my superiority.

Parker bought a droschky driver's clothes for me second hand and a little the worse for wear, but certainly an excellent disguise.

"No one will recognize me in these," I said as I put them on.

"Not if you'll let me give your face a touch or two, sir. I can do that with the best of 'em."

"You've brought a black beard, man. That won't gee with my hair."

"Now that I've trimmed it a bit, it's an exact copy from life—the priest's. I had him in my eye when I bought it. We always work to a copy."

"Priest's?"

"Father Tesla, sir—where Rachel Vologda lives. I studied him when I was there to-day."

"You've got him on the brain, Parker, as well as his household. But this won't do for me."

"Of course the moustache would have to go, sir. But with just a little darkening your hair and eyebrows would match fine with a black beard. It would make the disguise perfect, sir. Will you let me show you?"

I sat down before the glass and he put on the beard. I was astounded at the change.

"It's a splendidly made beard. I shouldn't know myself, I think, if I met me," I said.

Parker laughed conceitedly. "I think I know this business, sir."

"Fire away," I said. He did; and in a few minutes I am convinced that not a soul in Minsk would have known me. He was about to darken the eyebrows when a servant

knocked. A young man was asking for Parker."

"You'd better see who it is," I told him and he came back with a surprise. It was Rachel Vologda in her brother's clothes, and she wanted to see me immediately.

I took off the disguise and went to her.

"I dared not ask for you, and could not ask for Mr. Parker in my own clothes——"

"Never mind about that. What is it?"

"I am sure there is some harm intended to Countess Gorkov. Count Otto was with Father Tesla yesterday, and again to-day. I listened to-day and heard them speak of the Countess, and something about a marriage. The Father is to be ready at eight o'clock to go somewhere with the Count who is to call for him in his carriage."

"To-morrow night." The words flashed into my thoughts on the instant and apprehension started a hundred fears.

"You don't know where they are going?" She shook her head.

"Would to heaven that I did. But I know some wrong is planned.

"Go back at once to the house. Find out anything you can. I will come just before the hour you have said. Be ready to let me in and get me straight to the priest."

I soon had my plan—to be present when the Count made his call. I'd give him the surprise of his life.

When Parker came back from seeing her away, I sent him straight to Mirla's house

with a letter of warning, and told him to give it into no hands but her own. In this pestilential atmosphere of intrigue one couldn't tell whom to distrust.

While he was gone I lit a cigar and paced up and down the room thinking for all I was worth and trying all round for the meaning of the new development.

Then Parker brought me back my letter unopened. Mirla had not been home since early in the afternoon. She had received a letter which had greatly agitated her and had at once driven away in the carriage with the messenger who had brought the letter; and no word had come from her since.

My worst fears were thus confirmed, and I was railing against the scoundrelism of Count Otto when he came sauntering in. My first impulse was to drag the truth out of him by force; and my fingers itched for the work.

"Hullo, feel bad?" he asked, casually. "You look queer."

"Bilious attack. Confinement to the house doesn't suit me."

"Oh, I see now what it is. You've shaved your moustache."

"Thought of going out this afternoon—might disguise me a bit."

He laughed. "Not been out all day then?" Just a shade of anxiety in the sharp glance.

"Not outside the door I'm right off colour; head like the racing screw of a liner."

"I'm down too Been at Vilna all day

and have to go to Petersburg to night. You'll be free of one of your worries, you see."

"I'm afraid I don't take much interest in your movements—nor in anything else with a head like this."

"Well, I thought you'd like to know. Coming down to dinner—or rather have it here?"

"Coming down," I said, "But I'd rather be in bed."

With that he sauntered off. He had acted better than usual but I had the key now and could read him. He wished to make sure I had not been to Mirla's that afternoon.

I slipped into my dress clothes; and it was not until I was nearly ready that a plan flashed into my head—bold enough to set me thinking hard.

"See that my revolver is ready loaded, Parker, and be ready to get me into that disguise the moment I come up," I said, as I left to go to dinner.

CHAPTER VIII

A CHARACTER PART

COUNT OTTO had already told his sister and the Prince that I was unwell, and at dinner it was comparatively easy for me to act up to the part. Both were sympathetic, but the Princess was inclined to be suspicious, watching me closely as I fooled with the food on my plate. I tried a single mouthful of each dish, chewed and chewed and chewed like a valetudinarian, and then sent away the plate.

The Prince was for dosing me heavily with brandy, a great Russian remedy for everything. I accepted the first offer with eagerness, but after a sip, put the glass down affecting the manner of one anxious not to be thought impolite but nevertheless nauseated.

I shivered now and again : at least I commenced to shiver and as if with a great effort checked it. Indeed I endeavoured to manifest all the symptoms of a bad bilious attack.

" You should have ridden with me to-day, Mr. Carstairs," said the Princess.

" Save for one reason my regret that I did not is profound. And that reason is that when I have these attacks I am a perfect log. I should have bored you beyond telling.

With a head that throbs, throbs, throbs like a pneumatic riveter, it is almost impossible to be even coherent."

"I am sorry," she said.

"It is really nothing. Men make so much of their little aches and ailments, you know," I replied, with a weary smile, putting my hand to my head and wincing as though in exquisite pain. "Nothing that is, that a few hours sleep will not cure."

"You should be in bed," declared the Prince.

"It is the best place, of course," I replied, with a half suppressed shiver.

"The Princess will excuse you, I am sure," he volunteered, very courteously. She agreed, and after a little demur I left the table.

"I wish you speedy recovery," she said as I went out and I turned and thanked her. I was satisfied that I had deceived them all.

I went slowly upstairs lest any of the servants should be watching me: but the moment I was in my rooms I lost not a moment.

I tore my evening clothes off and put myself in Parker's hands.

"Make me as much like Father Tesla as you can, Parker, but use as little of that make up stuff as possible. And be as quick as you know how." He had very deft fingers for the work and when he had done with me he declared I could pass for the priest's twin brother.

As I got into the Russian dress I gave him his instructions. "I'm ill, you understand. I've acted a bad bilious attack downstairs for which I am going to bed. Stay here: don't let a soul come into the room, but say that I am in bed. When I get back, if I have any difficulty about entering the house, in this dress, I shall ask for you and use the name of Vologda—you are not likely to forget that, you know—and you must come down, address me by that name and bring me in."

"Can't I go with you, sir?"

"I myself don't know where I'm going. Now give me the revolver, and come down with me, and chat as we go. I must get out of the house without any one recognizing me."

We went down by the back stairs, got past the servants without any question, stood a moment by the door chatting casually as a couple of the stablemen came in, and the next minute I was away hurrying in the direction of Father Tesla's house.

One of the church clocks was chiming a quarter to eight as I turned into the street.

I tested the disguise first on Rachel Vologda.

"What do you want?" she asked: the light from within the house full on my face.

"To see the father," I answered in a feigned voice. "I am his brother."

"You must come to-morrow," she said, and made to shut the door.

I put my foot in and prevented this. "What of your promise?" I said in a low

tone in my own voice, checking with a gesture her little cry of surprise.

"Who is that?" called some one in a rather high pitched voice, apparently from a room close by.

"I must see the Father at once," I said, stepping inside and signing to her to shut the door.

"Some one who says he is your brother, Father," said Rachel, pointing to the door of a room at the back of the house.

"My brother!" said the voice; and I heard him get up as I hurried to the room and entered.

He started back in profound surprise at sight of me. Parker had done his work well indeed. There was a mirror behind the priest and glancing from him to my reflection in it, I saw the face resemblance was exact, although he was much stouter in body than I.

There was as much fear in his eyes, too, as surprise.

I shut the door behind me and signalled him to resume his seat.

"Who are you?"

"Your brother—in the brotherhood." I spoke the last three words deliberately. It was a safe shot after what Viralmi had told me. It went home. His hands clenched nervously; and when he spoke next, his voice was down a couple of tones and unsteady.

"What do you want?"

"I take your place to-night in the marriage you have promised to perform."

“What do you mean?”

“Do you dare to question me?” I cried in a ringing tone. “You are suspect. A sign from me and those without will act. You are in league with that enemy of the people, Count Otto Zuloff. He has been in this house and you have let him leave. You are trying to act with both sides, brother, and the penalty of treachery is—death.” I paused before the word and took out my revolver. “Which side do you choose? To serve this aristocrat, or help to deliver him and the woman he would marry into our hands. Quick.”

My little display succeeded. He was so scared that he had to lean against the table for support.

“I will do what you wish. I am no enemy of the people. Haven’t I given proof enough of it. Did I not give the information about the Englishman? Did I not——”

“Silence. Get me a full costume like that you wear. Quick.”

He fetched the things instantly from a small room beyond, and observing exactly how he wore his, I put them on over my droschky driver’s costume. This filled out my figure, so that now I was his very replica in form as well as face.

“Your ready compliance will stand you in good stead,” I declared, scarcely able to restrain a smile at the reflection of myself in the glass.

But he had no smile in him. He was white

to the lips. "Will you tell me what is to happen?"

"By to-morrow we hope the people will have two enemies less—possibly three. The Princess Volonesh may make the third."

He tossed up his hands and trembled. "It is well," he murmured, not meaning a letter of it. "But Count Otto is not the people's enemy. He is secretly their friend, I know this. It was he who gave me the Englishman's description and——"

"Enough," I broke in sternly. "Are you the judge, or are we?"

He was a pitiful coward—fortunately for me, no doubt—and at my stern tone he all but collapsed, sinking with a sigh of fear into a chair close by.

At that moment some one knocked at the house door.

"Go into that room," I said, pointing to where he had gone for the priest's garb. "Remain there one hour and pass the time in praying for courage to be true to the people, and then leave the city. If you are found here to-morrow there will be judgment without such a respite as now."

As soon as he had gone I opened the room door. "Who is there?" I asked imitating his voice as nearly as I could, and following it with a fit of coughing. I had studied him intently; voice, gestures, walk, manner, his stoop of the shoulders and forward pose of the head.

Count Otto was in the narrow hallway.

"Are you ready, Father?" he asked, as I went out, holding a handkerchief to my mouth.

"Quite." I answered. Then to the girl, "Rachel I shall be back——" and I looked interrogatively to Count Otto.

"In a couple of hours or so at most. It isn't far," he said, as he went on to the carriage.

"You hear, Rachel," and in a low tone "The Father is in the inner room. He may come out as soon as we are well away. But you must act amazement when you see him."

"Come along, man," called Count Otto, impatiently, and I followed him into the carriage, which was driven off at a rapid pace.

As soon as I was in my seat I affected to be seized with another violent fit of sneezing and coughing, and at the close sat back exhausted and breathing heavily, with my handkerchief pressed to my mouth.

"Got a bad cold?" asked my companion.

"Yes," I murmured, nodding and putting my hand to my throat.

"Affects your throat, eh? I can hear it in your voice. By Jove, don't lose it before the ceremony."

"Oh, no," I answered hoarsely, clearing my throat with much apparent effort. I had of course to prepare him for the difference between the voices of the real man and my imitation, although I did not wish to speak more than was absolutely necessary during the ride.

"Don't talk if it hurts you. You can do your part of the talking presently—when it will be necessary." He laughed at this as at a joke. He was obviously on the best of terms with himself, confident of success, in high spirits and without a shade of suspicion of the trick I had played upon him.

Presently he lit a cigarette, drawing in the smoke and puffing it out again with the air of a man thoroughly at ease with the world, and soon afterwards began to talk.

"Do you guess where we are going?"

That was about the last guess in the world I could hazard; but I leaned forward, looked out of the window and then shook my head.

"My sister's villa in the Munska district. Everything's ready, and I'll keep the carriage to take you back home. But you'll have to go alone, my friend," he chuckled. "I've prepared you for a bit of a scene, and you'll know what to do. Get it over as soon as you can."

I nodded. "But if she objects?"

He turned on me very sharply. "Of course she'll object. If it was clear sleighing, should I want you? I know you're a coward: and if you're afraid, say so now and we'll go back. But, by heaven, if you do, I'll say what I know about——"

"Ah, no," I cried, as if in great fear.

He laughed. "Ah, I thought that would bring you to reason. Look here. I don't believe you run straighter with me than with others—and I know how infernally crooked

you can be. That's why I didn't tell you before where we are going. You don't like the thing—I know that—and I know you're afraid. So I thought it was quite possible the affair might get known by accident—a Father Tesla accident," he said, emphasizing the sneer.

"I'll be honourable with you, I swear by my robe," I cried with a shake of emotion in my tone.

"Choose something cleaner to swear by. It's easily found. And mark this, when you take an oath I don't believe you. But this'll keep you straight. A word whispered in the ear of my brother-in-law, Prince Volonesh, and carried by him to the Governor, and one of the Minsk churches will be priestless and the ex-priest will be looking up old friends down under ;" and he pointed down. "Hell, do you understand ?" and he chuckled again.

"I have not deserved this," I murmured nervously.

"But I've got a purpose in telling you. There'll be some trouble for some of us after this night's business. The Countess Gorkov isn't the girl to put up with it quietly. My people will see *me* through and I'll do all I can for you. Besides, she'll be my wife, and that can't be undone. But the best thing you can do is try a change of air, and be off to-morrow morning, unless you go when it's over to-night. And stay away till the storm's done."

"You frighten me," I said, with a gesture of agitation.

"That won't hurt anybody," he sneered.

"But she comes to you willingly?" I ventured after a pause.

"Has your cold taken your wits away? Willingly? Yes, very much. I sent a scrawl in the name of that infernal, interfering Englishman, that he'd been caught by the strikers—I wish he had, the brute—and was at the Princess's villa, likely to die. That brought her. What's the matter?" he broke off, noticing the start I gave.

I had another fit of coughing and sneezing. Then I stammered, "I was laughing. It was simple, and therefore clever."

"A devilish rum laugh," he muttered. "But it was clever; and a devil of a job I had to get his handwriting. I had to break into his room last night and was nearly caught. But I took something else too, that he'll miss by and by. He is a fool. All the English are."

"You are very daring. What else was it you took?" I ventured to ask.

But he would not tell me. He scowled. "It has nothing to do with your business to-night." The question appeared to make him think he had been talking too freely, and with a curse at my curiosity he lapsed into silence, leant back and smoked cigarettes furiously until the carriage stopped.

"Here we are. Now for it, by heaven," he said, with a deep breath of suppressed excitement.

And with that he opened the door for us to alight.

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CHAPTER IX

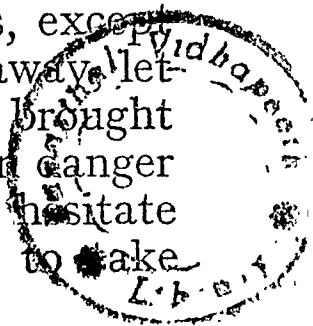
AT THE PRINCESS'S VILLA

COUNT OTTO stopped to give the order to the coachman—to wait and take me back to the city—and then led the way into the house.

It was a comparatively small house ; plain, square and solid ; enlarged by a wing which had been built on its right. A short drive from a pair of very tall gates led to the front door ; a high wall secured absolute privacy ; and the lower windows were heavily barred. Altogether a well chosen place for the purpose to which it had now been turned.

The Count had a key of the front door, and I was careful to notice the fastenings. The lock was an ordinary spring latch—very strong, like everything else—but quite simple to open. There were bolts, but the Count did not shoot them. All this might be very useful to know later.

I had no set plan in my thoughts, except that I was determined to get Mirla away, let the cost be what it might. I had not brought my weapon as a toy, and if she was in danger and I was driven to bay I should not hesitate to use it. The carriage was ready to take



me back to the town and Mirla should go with me.

But exactly what steps I should take to carry through my resolve I had not settled. I could not settle them, indeed. They must depend upon how matters developed and what opportunities offered. Force was only to be the last resource ; and if I could win by some trick I would much rather do so.

He took me into a room close to the front door.

"Wait here. We will either come back to you here or I'll send for you. Don't leave this room." His manner was brusque, and his tone peremptory and bullying. It was clear that he thought he could order me about as he pleased and that I was too much afraid of what he knew to disobey.

There was a strong light in the room, and I resolved at once to put my disguise to a severe test. If he had any doubt about my being Father Tesla, I had better learn it while we were alone and I had only him to deal with. So far he had only seen me in the semi-darkness.

Getting between him and the door I took the handkerchief from my face and let him have a good look at me as the light shone right upon me. "You won't be long?" I said, counterfeiting the priest's voice.

He started perceptibly and gave me a sharp piercing stare. "What's the matter? You look queer."

For an instant my fingers tightened on my

revolver. "I don't like the work. I'm nervous," I said.

"What a coward you are!" he exclaimed with an oath and a laugh; and I could see his confidence return. "What are you afraid of? There's only one thing you need fear: that's—what I know and could tell about you."

"Well, don't be long. I don't like being alone—and I want to get back."

"Alone," he cried contemptuously, "Do you think Alexia Nordheim's ghost will haunt you?"

I took the cue. I shuddered and glanced over my shoulder as if in fear. "Don't," I said.

It was all right. The test had answered, and with a final jibe and sneer he went away.

As I sat waiting the thought occurred to me to keep the secret of my disguise from him altogether, and to put the rescue on to the shoulders of the man I was personating.

It was a happy thought, and I chuckled over it. It would be a delicious touch to make the one scoundrel believe that the other had bilked him.

Count Otto's furious rage and thirst for revenge might very well lead to the unmasking of the villainous priest and so to the satisfaction of public justice.

I soon grew tired of cooling my heels there, so I opened the door, resolved to explore the house. I paused a few moments to listen and catching the hum of voices somewhere

in the rear of the house, I stole along the wall in their direction, very careful not to make a sound.

Mirla might be there, and I was beginning to grow impatient to get to her.

The voices came from the other side of a door at the far end of the passage. I could hear little more than murmurs in strange tones—men's and women's—so I knocked at the door and opened it.

It was the kitchen, and three men were sitting about. They all rose and stared at me.

"Your pardon. May I beg a cup of water?" I asked, raising my hand as if with a quasi-blessing.

They all bowed, and while a woman fetched me the water, one of the men said, "Am I wanted yet, Father?"

"Not yet, that I know, my son." I did not know how priests usually talked to such people; and this seemed to be correct.

"Won't you have some wine, Father?" asked the woman, who brought the water.

I should have relished it keenly, but with a sanctimonious air I shook my head gravely: "That is but vanity," I said, and emptied the glass.

"You are Her Highness's servants?" I asked.

"I'm not," replied the fellow who had spoken before. "These are. I'm here specially;" and he gave me a glance and then looked from me to the rest, his eyes full of

suggestion. "Your reverence does not recognize me?"

Very nearly a bad blunder, it seemed. The fellow was in the scheme, while the rest were not, and I ought to have known him. So I gave him a sharp significant look, and, holding up my hand again, said sleekly, "Peace to you all," and went out, closing the door softly behind me.

There was a moment's silence. Then one of the women said: "How he frightened me. Who is he?"

"Only a humbug of a priest—with his 'my son' and 'my child,' and his 'peace,' and all the rest of it." This from the man who had spoken to me.

"What's he doing here? You know, Andreas."

"Came with the Count, just now. Ivan drove them in, told me so. He's a beauty, I tell you."

"Perhaps he's listening," said the woman. I was, but at that I made off and was well away when the door was opened by one of them to test the truth of the woman's guess.

I had gained something. The Count had brought the man, Andreas, to the place. He was probably to act as witness, and the rest of the servants knew, or were supposed to know, nothing about the marriage.

As there appeared to be no one else on that floor, I went up the stairs. The house was irregularly built, and at the top of the first flight there was a long passage leading to

the wing which was comparatively shut away from the main part of the building. This was exactly suited to such a purpose as Count Otto's. I crept along the passage, pausing to listen at each door as I passed; and to make sure that no one was inside, I knocked gently at each and then opened it. Like a prudent housebreaker, I wished to have my retreat clear.

Three were empty but on opening the fourth, I had a very unpleasant surprise. A woman, middle-aged, hard-featured, dour-looking and ugly—the type of a female warder of a penitentiary—was there and turned angrily upon me.

"A thousand pardons. I thought this was the room where I should find the Count," I said.

The sight of my priest's garb—what chances a rascally priest must have—coupled with my soft speech and apologetic tone appeared to appease her anger, and she dropped a curtsey.

"If your reverence has been sent up, Andréas and me will be wanted."

"No, not yet," I assured her, adding with more truth than she suspected. "A little point has to be settled first. You will probably not be needed for quite half an hour and can safely go down to Andréas and the rest."

"I need something, indeed," she said, "Talk about wild, restless, harum scarum creatures, I never saw the like, and I've had to do with some wild ones in my life. She was

madder than many real mad ones I've minded, with her airs, and her tantrums, and ragings and goings on—because I would not take her to him."

"Ah, I believe she is devoted to the Count," I exclaimed, showing the whites of my eyes in rhapsody. "Love is a heavenly thing."

She gazed at me open-eyed and put her hand to her mouth that I might not perceive her smile of derision.

"Oh, yes, she's passionately fond of *him*. But it was the Englishman she wanted to see. We told her he'd been hurt and was lying in the house, too ill to see her. She's—well, she—*is*;" and as though words were poor things to describe her meaning she tossed up her hands and shook her head.

"You are right, she is as tender hearted as a lamb," I declared in my most unctuous manner.

"There isn't much lamb about her," grunted the woman. "Anyway, I haven't seen it. And there'll be some trouble before this thing is finished."

"It is possible, yes, it is possible, but even lambs have at times to be constrained and coerced." I don't know how much more of this kind of canting humbug the woman would have swallowed, but at that moment a thought occurred to me. "He is doubtless alone with her now, and needs my help in prevailing with her."

"He's with her, right enough, but I don't know about prevailing. There's only one

way that I know in such a case—get the thing done, and talk about it afterwards.”

“It will be for her ultimate good, of that I am convinced, or I had had no part in it.”

The woman looked at me very significantly, coughed drily, and after telling me the room I sought was at the end round a passage to the right, went downstairs. She probably knew something of Father Tesla and thought about as well of him as I did.

I went to the room she had indicated and heard voices within : Count Otto's in sullen determination, Mirla's in indignant anger. While the Count was speaking I tried the door softly and found it locked on the inside.

This threatened a check, but I resorted to a little ruse. Going a few paces along the passage, I ran with heavy tread to the door and knocked hurriedly.

“Who's there ?”

“I, I, Father Tesla. Open the door. Quick ! Something has happened,” I cried in a tone of alarm. But the door remained shut.

“What is it ?” called the Count.

“Open. Open. I daren't stay I'm going ;” and I made a couple of steps as though I were running off.

This succeeded. He opened the door and was coming out to me when, as if in a panic of fear, I pushed him back and entered the room with him. Then I snatched at the door, closed and locked it and pocketed the key.

My old experiences as an amateur actor of character parts recurred to me at that moment,

as, with the stooping carriage of the priest, I crouched by the door, listening, trembling, and glancing about me with the quick startled glances of a panic-stricken coward.

Mirla, whose sharp eyes I feared would pierce my disguise and lead her to some tell-tale outbreak of surprise, had not the faintest thought that I was the man supposed to be lying dangerously wounded in another part of the house.

"What is it, man?" cried Count Otto.

"I don't know," I gasped breathlessly.

"What has frightened you?"

"I don't know." I gasped again. I did not.

"Well, why did you come here, to this room?"

"I couldn't leave without seeing you after what you said."

I heard him swear as he pulled at his moustache and turned to cross the room.

Mirla was staring at me, her lips parted, her breath coming quickly, and her eyes wide open in questioning alarm and deepening despair; and the instant Count Otto's back was turned, I threw off the stooping attitude of the priest, drew myself to my full height, and put my finger to my lips as I signalled with eyes and expression that all was well.

CHAPTER X

AN UN-MATRIMONIAL CEREMONY

MY hurriedly signalled warning to Mirla nearly precipitated a crisis. She recognized me instantly, and the revulsion of feeling was overpowering. Her fears, which they had fostered all the afternoon by the lies they had told her about my having been badly wounded, had been followed by a sickening dread for herself when Count Otto had arrived and told her bluntly that she was helpless and absolutely in his power, and must consent to marry him at once.

At the sign from me and her instant recognition, all this desperate suspense fell like a broken cobweb.

"Dick!" she cried in a tone of delighted relief; and then with a quick, grateful "Thank God," she sank into a chair and covered her face with her hands.

The name nearly did it. I resumed the priest's stooping carriage as Count Otto turned and stared suspiciously from Mirla to me. "What's the meaning of this, Mirla?" he asked.

There was no reason for prolonging my disguise, beyond my desire to let him believe Father Tesla had played him false. He was

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quite powerless to do any harm now that I had him alone in the room, and I was on the point of telling the truth bluntly when Mirla sprang up.

"You heard me thank Heaven for having sent a good man to my aid," she said.

"Where is he?" sneered the Count.

"There," said Mirla, pointing to me.

He followed her gesture and, sneering at me, shrugged his shoulders. "I don't see him."

"I have looked in his eyes and know him for one," she retorted; and then I began to see the moves.

"Good man. Oh, yes. He's here for a good purpose—to make us man and wife. Eh, Father?"

"It is for that purpose the Count brought me with him in his carriage, Countess," I declared; and was much mistaken if a gleam of keen enjoyment did not flicker in her eyes at this reference to the trick I had played upon Count Otto.

The situation for two of the three of us had changed suddenly to comedy.

"Do you know how I was brought here?" she asked.

"I have heard that a mistake, made in regard to some worthless interfering fellow, roused your solicitude."

"Good," said Count Otto. Mirla nearly smiled; but she got her own back directly.

"Worthless!" she cried, with excellently imitated indignation. "Do you know, sir, that he was a friend—one of the only real

friends I have had in all my life, a brave man who had saved my life and who stayed here——”

“Your pardon, need we speak further of him?”

“They told me he was lying here wounded to death and had asked for me; it was all false, thank Heaven.”

“It was not false,” said Count Otto. “If I had not got him from the mob and carried him here, he would have been torn to pieces; and as soon as Father Tesla has married us, you can go to him.” The cool, deliberately spoken lie almost took my breath away.

“I did not know that,” I said gravely. Mirla’s lip curled, and she turned away to enjoy the situation, I think.

“You saved his life, then, Count?”

“We’ve had enough of this,” he answered.

“Countess, can I prevail with you to do what is asked of you?”

“Do you ask me to marry this man?” she retorted quickly, wheeling round upon me.

“You can surely measure the passing strength of his affection for you, the mastering desires of his heart, in the strenuous effort now made. Can you not meet his plea with consent?”

Mirla was biting her lip now and her eyes were dancing with suppressed enjoyment. “Your words move me, father. Let me think,” she said, pressing her hands to her face.

Count Otto was dull enough to take this seriously. He nodded to me during the pause, to proceed in the same line. But I knew that Mirla was meditating some further stroke and was not a little disturbed lest she should go too far.

She turned then to the Count. "Mr. Carstairs is in the house, you say?"

"You would not believe me when I told you."

"You can prove it. Take me to him, and if on his cousin's behalf he will release me from that engagement, I will marry you."

I never saw a man more baffled in my life, and had to have a fit of coughing to cover my laugh.

"Yes, I'll go and see if he is conscious enough to speak," he stammered after hesitating; and he came toward the door where I stood.

But I did not mean him to leave the room, so I signalled him a warning. "Alas! I know that he is incapable of so much effort."

"You see, Mirla, Father Tesla has seen him."

Then she played me a trick of sheer naughtiness, with a pretty gesture of confidence in me. "Father, I will trust you. You know my position and feelings. If you advise me to marry the Count here, I will consent."

I paused. It was my turn to feel embarrassment, and Mirla was wicked enough to enjoy it hugely. "I have not come to make so critical a decision, I can only suggest, I

cannot decide, my daughter. That is for you."

"You hear?" she said to the Count. His face was as black as a thundercloud, and he scowled at me.

"You can decide well enough. You came here to marry us, didn't you?"

"I had not then heard the Countess' side. After what she has said I cannot perform any ceremony of the kind, without her consent."

"Do you dare to turn against me?" he cried, with a half-smothered oath. "You know what it will mean to you," he added in a low tone, stepping close to me.

"To me it seems to mean that in this you are acting like a villain," I said.

There was no comedy now. The moment had come for action, and Mirla watched us with quickening breath, following every word and gesture closely.

In the pause I thought as hard as I could how to bring the scene to a close. My plan now was to disable him and render him helpless, so that we might escape.

"Do you mean to play me false? I'll have your life if you do," he said, in the same tone of concentrated fury.

"I cannot do it, Count."

"You shall do it, or——" he left the threat unfinished.

"I will not do it. She must leave with me."

At this his rage broke all bounds. "You

dirty dog of a filthy priest, I'll——" He clapped his hand to his pocket, but before he could take anything out, I seized and held it in a grip that surprised him ; and plunging my hand into the pocket pulled out his revolver.

" You meant to murder me," I said ; and, laying the weapon down on a chair, I closed with him. The struggle was only a very short one. He would have been no match for me had the conditions been level. But I had the advantage of the first hold ; while his surprise at such treatment from the man he had deemed his creature, helped his defeat.

I thrust him down on his face, pinning his arms behind him, and, glancing round the room, signed to Mirla to give me the silken cords from the curtains. With these I pinioned him securely ; and then tied up his legs.

Next I improvised a gag, fixed it between his teeth, and thrust him into a corner of the room. Then, as a last proof to him that I was the priest, I stood up, and in a canting tone called all to witness that as a man of peace I had but acted in self-defence.

Unlocking the door, I motioned to Mirla to leave the room, and I followed, turning the key behind me and thrusting it into my pocket.

Once safely out of the room, Mirla caught my arm. " Oh, Mr. Carstairs, how can I ever thank you ? "

" Back to ' Mr., ' eh ? That ' Dick ' you let out nearly gave the whole thing away.

But we must get out of the house before we stop to quarrel over it."

"Quarrel!" she exclaimed, with a little catch in her voice. "Do you think——"

"Oh, people nearer than cousins do it sometimes. But we mustn't stop even to quarrel now about whether we ever shall quarrel by and by. I think we shall get out without any bother. There are some servants downstairs and a man and woman brought by him to be witnesses."

"There's the awful woman who was my gaoler."

"Same woman, and a man to fit. Now, let me go first. I think they are all safe in the kitchen."

I stole quickly forward to the stair head. The way was clear, and I beckoned Mirla to join me. "Silence now. There is a carriage waiting outside to take me back to the town after the ceremony—the Count's own kindly forethought—and we must get to it if we can without rousing suspicion."

We ran down the stairs, and my hand was all but on the latch of the front door when some one opened the kitchen door.

"Well, I don't care; I tell you I heard something, and I'm going up to see." It was the woman's voice, and her coming threatened the very trouble I was so anxious to avoid. I feared that if the coachman, Ivan, heard anything was wrong in the house I might whistle for the chance of getting him to drive us back to Minsk.

Instinctively I hurried Mirla into the side room where Count Otto had taken me, in fact I almost pushed her in, and stood at the door until the woman came.

"Ah, my good soul, is the Count ready? I am anxious to go."

"I thought you were with him," she answered suspiciously.

"I was, but he was not ready when I left."

At that moment Mirla moved inside the room, and the woman being quick-eared heard her. "What was that?" she asked, and pushed forward as if to enter the room.

I put myself in the way. "Are you the mistress of this house, my daughter?"

"No, but I know the rustle of a skirt when I hear one."

"Woman!" I exclaimed indignantly, "what would you dare to insinuate?"

"Andreas! Andreas!" she cried loudly, and I could almost have found it in me to clap my hand to her mischievous mouth.

The man came running out.

It was an ugly corner and I could only see how to turn it with some of the truth. So I told it and embellished it with dramatic gesture.

"Miserable wretches that you both are," I cried fiercely; "conspirators with the scoundrelly villain who has paid the penalty for his sin against a pure innocent, helpless soul and now lies above stairs. You are guilty of the blood that has been shed and I will see that justice is done."

But we must get out of the house before we stop to quarrel over it."

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Manner and words both helped to scare them. The man was speechless and white with fear; the woman stammered, "What do you mean?"

"Mean?" I cried, advancing toward them with uplifted hand, and then pointing my finger at them. "In the name of law and of justice I charge you both with your share of the deed. Nor shall you escape my vengeance. You may whine you did not mean that murder should be done, but that plea shall avail you nothing. Go to the room above and see the fruits of your villainy and seek to save the life your foul crimes would sacrifice. Go," I thundered, with a scowl—"go, before I call the servants here to seize you until I return with the police."

They were both rascals, and were deeply impressed by my manner as well as panic-stricken at my suggestion of murder. They stared at me horror-bound, too frightened to move.

But at that moment chance befriended us. The gag which I had crudely fastened for Count Otto was apparently beginning to work loose, and the pause of silence following my words was broken by what sounded like a horrible groan. It was no doubt the Count's attempt at a shout for help.

They both started, and after a second's hesitation the woman bolted up the staircase and the man followed.

The instant they were out of sight I had the door open and hurried Mirla into the carriage.

"You know where to drive, my good Ivan," I said, in my silkiest priestly tones.

"I didn't know there was any lady to go, father."

"It's all right." Then I whispered to Mirla, "I'll ride on the box with him to prevent mistakes;" and up I clambered.

"I'd rather wait for orders, father," he said, and just then I caught the sound of some commotion in the house.

There was no time to waste in talk, so I snatched the reins out of his hand and rattled down the short drive, just as the door of the house was opened and some one called, "Ivan, Ivan."

"They are calling me back," said the man.

"And you can go back after you have driven me home. But not before. Understand that," I said firmly.

He made a grab at the reins then. "I'm going back now," he said.

I seized his wrist and gave it such a wrench that he cried out with the pain of it. "Listen. A priest is a man of peace, Ivan; but even a priest will not brook insolence from a servant; I will take none from you. You have felt that Heaven has not denied me strength. Don't force me to use it again on you."

He saw the wisdom of non-resistance then, and gave me no more trouble. I drove for a mile or so and then handed him the reins.

"The sooner you reach my house the sooner

you will get back to the Count. I'll sit here by your side and watch you."

I stayed while we covered another three or four miles—impatient though I was to join Mirla—and then I had him pull up and I left the box.

I told her briefly what had happened and then consulted as to where we had better drive, and that, with the object I had—to lead Count Otto to believe that it was indeed Father Tesla who had frustrated his scheme—I proposed to go to the latter's house in Rostov Street.

"Of course I haven't an idea where we are and which is the best way to get to your house," I added.

"It is on the other side of the town, not very far from the priest's."

"Good. Then we can easily get some sort of carriage from there."

"Do you know, you haven't let me thank you yet?"

"Shall we take that as done until we've cleared things up a bit?"

"Yes, but, cousin—Dick, I——"

"You mustn't talk like that to a priest. Why you don't even know Father Tesla to speak to. Seriously, I can quite understand you were pretty glad to see me and I know you must be curious to learn how I managed it; and I'm just as eager to tell you. It's all due to that Jewess, Rachel Vologda;" and then I gave her a pretty full account of what had occurred.

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I was close to the end when the carriage stopped with a fearful jerk and a lurch, which sent us both sprawling on to the front seat.

Almost at the same instant the roar of scores of voices burst forth in cheers, and shouts, and yells, and whoops, and a mob came pressing forward to the windows on both sides of the carriage.

"The strikers," said Mirla.

The din and clamour were enough to shake stout nerves ; but she was as firm as a rock ; and I looked round with unbounded admiration of her steadiness in face of a crisis that might mean anything in the way of peril for us both.

CHAPTER XI

MIRLA AS REVOLUTIONARY

WE had but few seconds to decide what to do: and they were seconds of very crowded thought. Whether the danger to Mirla was greater than to me it was impossible to say. Her rank and wealth, if she were recognized, would make her the certain object of the mob's fury.

My own plight was much the same. Viralmi had told me enough to let me understand the treatment which the strikers would mete out to the man who had prevented the outrage upon Prince Volonesh; and here I was caught riding in one of the Prince's carriages; disguised as——

At that my decision was taken with a sort of mental snap.

A glance at Mirla showed me what I had not observed before, that she was very plainly dressed in a morning costume and was not wearing a hat.

"Tie a handkerchief over your head, force your hair back as much out of sight as possible, and put your rings in your pocket. Quick, for the love of God; and leave me to do the talking."

There was no time for more, for both doors

were wrenched open, half a dozen dirty faces were thrust in and a cry went up outside : " The Prince ! The Prince ! Drag him out, drag him out ; " with many offensive epithets—all showing that the Volonesh livery had been recognized.

" Oh, thanks be to heaven you have answered my message and have come to help us, friends and brothers," I cried ; and much to the surprise of all I seized the hands of those nearest to me and wrung them fervently. " Thank heaven my message reached you." Then I got out and embraced one or two of them, as if overcome with emotion.

" Why it's only a priest," cried some one, with an oath ; and a laugh greeted the remark.

I turned on the man like a flash and thundered at him, " Who are you that dare to speak of my office with a ribald curse ? Are you more powerful than heaven that you help the noble cause of the people better than heaven itself ? Think you that any cause, however just and good, can succeed without Divine aid. Shame on you, shame, I say, on an unworthy brother, and a false comrade."

The fellow shrank away abashed and many of those around called, " Shame !"

I had made the impression I wished, and followed it up quickly. " Brothers," I cried, in the priest's high shrill tones, " you do not know yet the full value of the magnificent thing you have done to-night ; nor who it is you have saved. Here in this carriage, the

carriage of a common enemy—is one flying from the vengeance of that enemy : one whose name should set every heart here pulsing fast with gratitude, and every tongue shouting with praise. That daughter of the people who was snatched but a few days since from the dangers of Kischineff, has come here undaunted by her sufferings, unchecked by her peril, to further the cause that is more than liberty or life to her. She has just been lured to a trap by an accursed aristocrat, a trap from which we are now escaping, partly by my humble agency.” I paused and a cheer was started, hesitating rather than hearty ; but it showed I was carrying some of the crowd with me.

“ Brothers,” I continued, “ we men know how to suffer for our country, but we seek to spare our women. This woman has not thought to spare herself for us. We men lead, as is right, for leadership spells danger : but this woman has faced the dangers of leadership, has done good deeds, has carried the light of the people’s cause into the darkest parts of the country, has dared the fury of a tyrant government, has faced and thwarted the petty officials whose looks are an insult and their words a curse, has given up friends, relatives, fortune, all for the people and taken to her heart in place of them every down-trodden man and suffering woman and oppressed and starving child. Born as you know, to comfort and plenty, she has sacrificed them on the altar of our cause, content instead

to bear the crown of thorns and the cross of imprisonment. Brothers"—and I held out my hand and helped Mirla forward—"Mirla Gorkov, the Little Anarchist, bids you greeting."

There was no mistaking the nature of the cheer that went up then as the mob swayed and pushed and jostled to get a sight of Mirla.

I was intensely excited. I knew the risk I had taken. I knew the possibility, probability, indeed, that some one in the throng might have seen the other Mirla Gorkov, or might recognize this Mirla as the Countess.

At that moment the lives of both of us hung by a thread.

But the thread seemed stout : and strengthened with every moment that passed without discovery.

The cheers died down and then broke out again ; and those about Mirla pressed forward to shake her hands.

"Can you possibly thank them ?" I whispered to Mirla. I could feel her hand trembling in mine ; but outwardly she was quite calm and smiling.

"Don't let my hand go, and I'll try."

I called for silence, for the Little Anarchist.

"Brothers," she began, her voice vibrating in her nervousness. "Brothers—and if there are any women here, Sisters, my heart thanks you. Persecution has wearied me. I can say no more now than give you the thanks of my full heart."

Once more the shouts and cheers broke out

—and as they were ceasing a voice called :
 “ Who is the priest ? ”

“ Who asked that ? ” I called. “ Is there a man here who does not know Father Tesla, the people’s priest ? Have I laboured and striven for you all this time not to be known of my brethren in the cause ? ”

“ Father Tesla ! Father Tesla ! ” came shouts in response.

The worst part of the ordeal was over, and I had given the priest such a reputation as would be very embarrassing to him, indeed, if, as was probable, any agents of the police were present.

“ How came you in the Prince’s carriage ? ” was the next question ; and in reply I gave them such an account of what had passed at the Villa—garbling it to make it appear an attempt to capture the “ Little Anarchist ”—as my imagination suggested on the spur of the moment : being careful, however, to exonerate the Prince Volonesh himself from any complicity.

Then two or three of the leaders pressed to us, welcoming Mirla almost with emotion, and putting such numbers of questions that, after ignoring some and parrying others, I pleaded that Mirla was nearly worn out and that they were in the way of killing her with kindness.

One man in particular was pertinacity itself. He was a man of middle height, very dark, whose closely trimmed beard set off his large features and high cheek bones, on one

of which was an ugly scar. His dress was that of a well to do citizen and he spoke well and with an air of authority.

His greeting of Mirla was more like adoration than admiration. When she gave him her hand he bent and kissed it. "This is the greatest hour of my life," he said with intense feeling. "Father, let me shake your hand."

"We are all brothers here," I returned.

"You have come to help the cause in Minsk?" he asked Mirla.

"Oh, no," I answered. "She is needed where the cause is not so strong as here."

"Where?"

"Brother," and I shook my head reprov-
ingly. "The essence of her work is the
secrecy of her movements. You know that."

"True, true, of course. My work is in
Vilna. I am Maxim Suvalski."

"Is that so?" I cried with enthusiasm, as
though I knew all about him. And I wrung
his hand again and Mirla followed my lead.
He was obviously delighted; so I used the
moment to urge that she must have rest.

"Where does she stay in Minsk?" he
asked.

Awkward, but there was no help for it.

"At my house in Rostov Street—but brother,
no one must know this."

"I will see to it," he answered and turned
away making place for others who gave us
less trouble and were for the most part con-
tent to exchange a few words. To them all I
told the same sort of story.

Meanwhile, at Suvalski's instance, the horses were put in the carriage again, and as the coachman, after a thrashing, had run away—much to my satisfaction—one of the crowd took his place and the man from Vilna got in with us.

"The man on the box is a Minsk leader," he said, "and he will see you safely to your house. The streets are full of our brothers for the cause is spreading fast, thank heaven."

We had not far to drive and Mirla leant back as though exhausted and prudently did not utter a word the whole time. Our companion was anxious to talk; so I managed to turn the subject on to the progress of the cause in Vilna, and let him talk as he would.

I was thinking of the extremely awkward fix we should be in if Father Tesla had not run away; and what our companions would do if they came face to face with the priest and his counterpart at the same moment.

But fortune was with us in that. Rachel Vologda opened the door, and bidding the man from Vilna good night with as little delay as possible, considering his intense admiration for Mirla and his urgent desire to be allowed to enter and continue his discussion with me, we got safely inside.

"Is the Father in?" I asked.

"No. He has left Minsk. He said he had had an urgent call away. I should have gone too, but I was afraid to leave the house lest any messages should come from you."

"A pretty how-d'ye-do if she *had* gone,"

I said, turning to Mirla ; “ and *this* Father Tesla couldn’t have got into his own house.” I spoke with intentional flippancy for I thought the strain must be telling upon her. But she showed no outward sign of it.

“ I am a sore trouble to you, I’m afraid,” she said with a smile. “ What had we better do now ? ”

“ The first thing is to get you safely home. You’ll be all right there of course ? ”

“ Why not ? I have learnt my lesson.”

“ Then, we’ll go. Rachel find a rough kind of shawl for the Countess, and get ready to come with us. You will stay the night at her house. Quick, you can only have two minutes.”

She hurried away on the instant ; and as I slipped off the clerical garb, I said to Mirla, “ Count Otto will probably hurry here in search of the priest and I wish his house to be empty. If Rachel stays at your house she will be an excellent messenger for you to send to me in the morning ; and she can come here safely if there is any need.”

“ You have another disguise under that robe ? ”

“ I’m a droschky driver. Now, as to to-morrow—”

Rachel came back then and sending her out to see that the way was clear we started.

We passed several groups of men on the way but no attempt was made to molest us or even to speak to us ; and we reached Mirla’s house without a difficulty.

"There is only one thing," I said as we stood in the hall. "About to-morrow's train. I shall probably use this dress for travelling the first part of the journey; and I will join you at Vilna. Send me word in the morning as soon as your plans are completed. And now, God be thanked, I can bid you good-night in your own house."

"I know whom I thank," she said simply.

"To-morrow you'll see everything in due perspective, and how really little I have done. But for your acting the 'Little Anarchist' as you did, I could have done nothing."

"You nearly took my breath away when you said that to them."

"They'd have quite taken ours if I hadn't. So that's all right. Good-night once more."

"I—I—don't know what to say to you. I think my heart this time is really too full for words."

"Two are enough now;" and I held out my hand.

"You make so light of everything," she smiled. "Good-night."

We had come out on top but I was very anxious to reach the Prince's house. It was close to midnight and I might have trouble in gaining admission. But I had not reached the end of the carriage drive before Rachel came running to fetch me back.

Mirla was waiting with a telegram in her hand. It was from Petersburg and cancelled her permit to leave the country.

Checkmate, this, with a vengeance

For an instant the news beat me. But seeing how it had agitated Mirla, I forced a smile and crumpled the telegram up in my hand.

"I'm not going to let a thing like this bother us," I said, confidently. "If necessary we'll go without a permit. We've had one experience of disguises ; and can profit by it for this. Don't let it cost you half a minute's sleep to-night. I'll think it all over and send Parker along in the morning. Now, mind, sleep whatever you do—we may have a good deal to do for the next day or so."

"I shall see the Prince to-morrow and tell him of to-day's outrage."

"No ; better do nothing, please, until you hear from me. Stay, yes ; write to Count Otto that unless he leaves Minsk to-morrow morning, you will tell the Prince ; and say you have told me everything. I'll get rid of him."

Again my dress enabled me to cross the city without trouble, and on giving the name of Vologda and asking for Parker, I found no difficulty in reaching my room unrecognized.

"Anyone been to the rooms ?" I asked him.

"His Highness came, sir, and almost insisted on my waking you ; he said he had most urgent news from Petersburg and must see you at once. But I stood him out that I daren't disobey your orders and he went away grumbling.

"Good. I'm as tired as a dog and must sleep. You must sit up all night, Parker, and keep watch : " and with that I scrambled into bed.

CHAPTER XII

A FEW WORDS WITH COUNT OTTO

I DID not wake very early and then did an hour's thought raking before getting up, in the effort to form a sort of campaign.

The Prince had scored with the Petersburg authorities and had outwitted me. His offer to go with Mirla to England had been merely a blind to get time in which to prevail at the Court ; and he had won. It might take months of negotiation to get that last telegram reversed. He knew that, too. In the future, therefore, I would deal as frankly with him as he had with me ; and no more so.

We would pretend to accept the decision and at the same time make all preparations for flight. Flight was our only alternative, now.

As to the Count—I would drive him out of our way. I knew the stuff he was made of. I would give him the chance that morning to clear out at once, without yesterday's story being told to Prince Volonesh, and would back it up with the charge about the theft of Mirla's money and the story of Rachel Vologda's sister. I had a pretty full hand of trumps, so far as he was concerned.

For myself, I would remain in the house—that being the safest place for me—and when

our preparations were complete, I would take Mirla away ; making the best opportunity and choosing my own time.

I should have to get passports in assumed names ; but Viralmi could do that easily ; and I felt sure he would.

I wrote to him as soon as I was up and wrote also to Mirla. I advised her to send a long explanatory telegram to Petersburg urging the grant of the permit ; and later in the day to come to the Prince to get him to withdraw his opposition. That was, of course, merely as a blind ; but by the time she came, I was confident that Count Otto would not only be gone but would have left behind him a renunciation of all claim to her hand ; and so the situation would be considerably changed.

I sent Parker off with my letters and sat down to wait for the visit I knew Count Otto would pay me after getting Mirla's letter. But the Prince came first. He was in a sedately jubilant mood.

"Your head is better, Mr. Carstairs ?" he asked as we shook hands.

"Thank you, I am quite myself after what last night did for me."

"I am delighted. I came to you but your man was as stern as a soldier on sentry go, in obeying your orders."

"The penalty of disobedience would have been dismissal, Prince, but I hope he in no way forgot himself ?"

"On the contrary, his manner was perfect. He is a jewel. I had important news for you."

"He told me. Had I foreseen your visit, of course I should not have allowed him to deny me for a mere bilious headache."

"I am sure of that," he said, graciously with a wave of the hand. "The news concerns Mirla. The permit for her to leave the country is withdrawn. I had a telegram last evening."

"That is serious—for her and of course for my cousin. I am only a sort of superior messenger in this, you see. What will be the next step?"

"To abandon this marriage, probably. In which case you will presumably scarcely care to remain longer away from your yacht."

"That is precisely my position," I replied with a smile. "Will you ascertain from the Countess her decision, or shall I?"

"Her decision is scarcely the point, Mr. Carstairs." This was said a little stiffly. "The marriage, as I told you at the first, is impossible."

"Yet I can scarcely go without knowing her decision, can I? You see my cousin rather looks to me and——" I ended with a flourish of the hand.

He frowned and after a pause got up. "I will send for Mirla to come here this afternoon. She has not been in her right mind throughout all this. She can't have been. The matter must be settled once for all."

"That is precisely my view," I agreed as I opened the door for him. What did he mean about "her right mind?" It was of no

consequence. The matter was going to be settled ; but the settlement was to be very different from his anticipations or I should play my strong hand of trumps very badly.

I lit a cigar and ran over the heads of the coming interview with Count Otto and what the Prince would do when the Count had been driven from the field, when a very disquieting question thrust itself forward suddenly.

Why was I so dead set upon getting Mirla away from Minsk ? I hate introspection ; but there are moments when only a coward will shrink from it. I sought to persuade myself that it was only the desire for her happiness. But I could not even pretend to believe that a bright-souled, high-spirited, keen-feeling girl like Mirla would be happy as the wife of such a man as my cousin. He was ten years her senior, a club man of club men, a prim bachelor, very groovy, unreceptive and a valetudinarian, who affected a sort of semi-sour cynicism to hide a laziness of both mind and body.

She was unhappy here, it was true ; but here there was at least the chance of escape ; while as Andrew's wife she would be plumped down in the midst of his dull, dowdy, do-nothing set, a skysoaring bird of freedom with a soul, made to cluck and scrape among a lot of barn door fowls. Was that better ?

She was resolved to go and had told me so, and further, my cousin had sent me to fetch her. True, but if he had come himself would he have done what I was doing in the face of

this family opposition, he a man to whom family authority was stronger than the creed of any church? If I knew anything of him, he would have gone back by the earliest train, and the first breath of the Prince's opposition would have blown his wish to marry Mirla to the four winds of heaven.

Why then was I—acting in his stead, by his desire, and for his wishes—so eager to so far exceed what I knew he would have done?

I knew only too well. I was acting for myself, while pretending to act for him.

I loved her. For me she was the one woman. I had known it from the moment when I had seen the man about to throw the bomb under the carriage in which she sat. It was love for her, no other feeling or motive, which was now setting every pulse galloping with zeal to serve her.

I could plead of course that I had loved her before I knew who she was. My honour was untouched so far as that. I had striven steadily to hide every sign of my love from her; and so far I had kept faith with my cousin. I believed that I had self restraint enough to go through with the task of self repression; but was I doing the square thing by her or my cousin to take her away—for such a motive?

Love is the deuce of a casuist: and for the life of me I could not find it in me to tell her that, for reasons I could not explain, I must throw the whole thing over and go away alone. I had not the pluck to play the part of such a coward.

To chase these disturbing thoughts away, I found a task to occupy me. Recalling Count Otto's words in the carriage that he had taken away something of mine which would cause me some trouble, I went carefully through my papers. There were very few of them and the discovery was soon made.

He had helped himself to my passport. He was welcome to it, I thought with a smile; for in view of my travelling in a disguise with the passport I had asked Viralmi to procure for me, its loss was not of the remotest consequence to me.

But it was another trump card. The Prince was not at all the sort of man to be pleased that his guest had been robbed at night in his house by his own kinsman.

I was chuckling over this when Count Otto entered.

He sauntered with a more than usually casual air.

"Glad to hear you're better. You looked deuced queer last night," he said, sitting down and lighting a fresh cigarette.

"You are back soon from Petersburg?"

"Petersburg?" he asked, forgetting his lie of the previous day. Then remembering it suddenly, he laughed: "Oh, that was put off."

"Only until to-day I should think, judging by what Countess Mirla has written me—unless indeed you mean to go farther than Petersburg."

"Not bad, that," he replied half insolently.

"It's about that matter I have come to speak to you. What has she written."

"That you made an attempt to marry her by force : that you got her out to your sister's villa on some false pretext, and kept her there while you fetched a priest, a Father Tesla, to perform the marriage."

He listened carefully ; tilted his chair, stretched himself back in it, puffed out the smoke slowly and smiled. Then he turned and looked at me, "Did you ever hear such a mad yarn in your life ?"

"Do you deny it ?"

"Absolutely. She must have dreamt it. I was no nearer my sister's villa yesterday than you were."

"Do you mean to charge her with deliberate falsehood ?"

"He brought his chair down suddenly, leant his arm on the table and grew earnest. "No, no ; not that of course. It's an hallucination. She has imagined it all. Women *do* have the most extraordinary delusions at times. I've no doubt she believes it all seriously--she threatens even to tell the Prince. Why the thing's too preposterous for anything but a sheer mental delusion."

This was to be the next move then. I recalled the Prince's last words to me. It was cunning. They would deny the whole episode and use it as a proof that Mirla was insane. Away went my last scruples of doubt as to getting her out of the country. But I affected to be deeply impressed by his words.

"It is an extremely serious thing to me," I said. "Do you suppose there is no foundation at all for her statement? Do you know if she was really at this villa?"

"I very much doubt it—but that can probably be proved. The servants will know." From which I gathered the Princess had already taken steps to clear them all out of the way.

"This priest, Father Tesla, who's he?"

"Never heard of him in my life," he replied airily. A particularly glib lie.

"By heavens!" I exclaimed, jumping up as if overcome with agitation. "If it's a delusion, she *must* be out of her mind."

"That's just what we fear," he said, falling straight into the trap, and confirming my belief as to the new line.

I sighed heavily and took a couple of turns up and down the room, and when I stood between him and the door with his back to me, I took the key of the room I had brought from the villa and imitated Father Tesla's voice. "I brought this key away with me. Shall I give it to the Princess or will you?"

From the topmost height of self confidence to the lowest depth of alarm, he collapsed like a snapped topmast. For a moment he dared not even look round, and when he turned slowly, in place of his jaunty devil-may-care manner his face was lined and gray and flabby with fear.

"Well, you don't answer." I tossed the key on to the table. "There's no delusion about sound, anyway."

"I—I don't understand," he stammered.

"Oh, yes, you do," I smiled. "By the way, I'll thank you to return that passport of mine which you stole when, as you told me in the carriage, you came searching for some of my handwriting, for that decoy letter."

He sat staring stolidly at the key as though it were some deadly charm of magic, and at last heaved a deep and heavy sigh.

I lit a cigar, wasting time in choosing and lighting it. As I did so he stared at me intently; my face first, then my body, as if wondering if I could possibly have played the part.

"I was the priest, right enough. I found the means to persuade him to let me take his place. You remember my bad cough and how I couldn't speak much on the drive out; and how you thought I'd better keep my voice for the ceremony. Come, you'd better pull yourself together. We have still some talking to do."

With another heavy sigh he rose. "I must go," he said hoarsely.

"No, you won't go yet."

For a moment he hesitated, and backed toward the door. "I *must* go."

"Don't you know me yet? You'd better do as I say, and sit down."

He gave in and resumed his seat, leaning his head on his hand. "What is it?" he asked.

"You're about the rottenest sort of human that's allowed to live, Count Otto: too rotten

for it to be any satisfaction for a decent man to abuse. You planned that thing yesterday—or somebody planned it for you; and now that it has failed you want to use it as an excuse for another and even viler scheme—to declare the Countess Mirla insane.”

“No, no,” he said, waving his hand feebly.

“Don’t interrupt me. You know what I say is true. You meant to use that scoundrel of a priest—not such a scoundrel as you because you had to use threats to compel him—for the work; and you chose him because he had helped you before in the foul matter of that poor girl, Martha Vologda.”

He started in surprise and was going to protest; but dropped his head again and held his tongue on meeting my look.

“To write the lie which was to lure the Countess Mirla to the villa yesterday, you broke into my rooms in the dead of night—guest though I was—and stole that which showed you the writing you had to forge; and then stole my passport, that I might find myself unable to get away, having already betrayed my name—through your priest again—to the strikers.”

I paused; but he had no heart to reply.

“That’s a pretty black record; but there’s worse—the reason for your eagerness to make this marriage.” He squirmed uneasily. “You know what’s coming. I know that you have stolen a hundred thousand roubles of her fortune. That, so far as my knowledge goes, fills the list: and that story with proofs—for I have

them—I am going to tell Prince Volonesh first and the police afterwards, if within the next two hours you have not made it plain to your sister and her husband that you have abandoned all thought of the marriage with the Countess Mirla, and left Minsk on your way out of the country.”

He gripped his chair and caught his breath as I named the terms.

“You can’t mean this?”

“Every jot and tittle of it, I mean. I was never in more deadly earnest in my life. And what’s more, you shall decide before you leave this room.”

He pushed his chair back, rose, and began to pace the room, thrusting his fingers through his hair distractedly.

“It’s too much—too much,” he cried. “It means ruin either way.”

“It means a hundred thousand roubles probably. I’ve little doubt the Countess would be glad to purchase freedom from your persecution at the price of condoning your theft.” I flung the sneer at him with all the contempt I could put in my tone.

“That’s a most infamous word,” he cried.

“How would you describe that act of yours, then, and the taking of my passport?”

He flung up his hands excitedly. “I won’t go. Do your worst.”

“Very good.” I rang my bell. He strode up and down watching me moodily while we waited. “Ask Prince Volonesh, with my compliments, if he can see me at once on a

most private and urgent matter," I said to the servant who came.

"Stay, Mr. Carstairs," broke in the Count.

I told the servant to wait until I rang again.

"I consent," declared Count Otto.

"The terms are higher now. You shouldn't have hesitated. You will now write an admission that you stole that money, and the passport, and a statement that you renounce all desire to marry her."

"No, no, by Heaven, I can't do that. I can't."

"Very good," I said, in the same level tone ; and laid my hand on the bell.

"Wait. Wait a moment, for God's sake," he cried, breathing heavily.

With my finger touching the bell I turned to him. "I give you one minute." I took out my watch, held it open in my hand and counted off the quarter minutes. At the minute I snapped the case to and put it in my pocket.

"I'll do it." Without another word I laid writing materials before him.

"You've won ; but don't think you won't pay for it." I made no reply.

For perhaps half an hour the scratch, scratch of his pen was the only sound in the room ; for he found some difficulty in wording the two statements ; and when he finished he handed the papers to me.

A glance showed they were enough for my purpose. "You can go ; and in two hours from now you will have left this house."

All the venom in his little malignant soul was in the look he cast on me as he went out, "I'll be even with you some day," he cried, with a deep and bitter oath.

I took no notice. I had had to lay it on heavily in the tussle, but now that I had beaten him I had no wish to grudge him the luxury of cursing me.

I had cleared him out of Mirla's path, and I read through the papers once again and put them in my pocket with a glow of satisfaction.

For about an hour I sat speculating upon the best way in which to turn the victory to account, and then a message was brought me from the Princess asking me to see her at once in her boudoir.

I knew what it meant—or rather I thought I did. She wished to persuade me to hold my hand in regard to her brother. I had no mind for that kind of interview and the way out seemed easy.

I sent a hundred regrets that I had to leave the house at once, but that I should not be long away, and would see her immediately on my return. But that should not be until after the time of grace had expired.

I rather plumed myself on my astute move—shortsighted idiot that I was. But who can be armed against a woman's cunning? What I really did was to walk right into the trap she laid.

A few minutes afterwards there was a little nervous knock, and she opened the door and stood hesitating on the threshold.

CHAPTER XIII

IN THE WEB OF A WOMAN'S CUNNING

SHE was a very beautiful woman ; and as she stood gazing at me, her large dark eyes eloquent with reproach, her face pale and bearing the traces of keen suffering, her voluptuous bust heaving with deeply stirred emotions, and the whole pose one of poignant grief, I could not but feel intensely regretful that I had had to bring this trouble upon her.

Of all the thoughts that chased through my mind as I rose, the last I dreamed of entertaining was that she was merely acting ; just fooling me, as I had fooled her brother the night before ; playing with me as a cat with a bird—just about as cleverly and just about as mercifully.

She paused as if unable for the moment to find words, and then said very slowly and accusingly : “ And you, Mr. Carstairs, an English gentleman and our guest, refused to come to me when I sent for you in my trouble.”

With that, she came a few paces into the room partly closing the door behind her ; but careful, as I remembered afterwards, to leave it slightly ajar. If I had not been a blind fool, I should have read the meaning of that little action and been on my guard.

"Please acquit me of indifference, Princess. My wish was merely to spare you and myself the pain of an interview at the moment."

"Until Otto had left the house, you mean?"

"Yes. That is it, precisely."

She sighed. "Yet of course I must talk to you before he goes. If necessary, plead with you." She came a step nearer and looked intently at me. "I wish I knew what plea would prevail." With a sigh she tossed up her hands and threw herself into a chair. "I am a very poor advocate."

"It is rather that you have a very bad cause, Princess."

She took the cue instantly. "Yes, a very bad one, I know. I know all. Otto has behaved villainously. He has persecuted Mirla—but we all wished them to be married. He took her money, in a fit of mad recklessness, to pay debts of honour in his regiment. He betrayed your name to the strikers—a thing the very thought of which shames me—because, fearing you would come between them, he hoped to frighten you from the city. He planned this mad thing yesterday and did all the wicked things leading up to it—ah, Mr. Carstairs, if you were not of the colder-blooded English race, you would know to what madness love will drive one."

She paused as if expecting me to make some reply; but I did not.

"How hard and stern you look. You have, perhaps, a sister?"

"No."

"I wish you had, for then you would know something of the torture I am enduring in this. Otto and I are of the South; warm-blooded, impetuous, reckless, if you will, when our hearts are touched: all our lives we two have been knit together in love and sympathy: what touches him touches me closely, what wounds him stabs me. It is me you are killing by this harshness to him."

"Your pardon as to my share in the matter. It is your brother's wrong doing that is the cause of your suffering, not my conduct. All that I have done is to insist that he shall leave the country for a time—he can easily get leave from his regiment with the influence behind him—and abandon the persecution of the Countess Mirla."

"And why are you so zealous on her account?"

"Surely my position in the matter is fully known, Princess?"

"Is it?" she said quickly, fixing her eyes upon mine as if to read every thought in my mind. "Is it? Are you quite sure?"

I threw up a mask of a smile and waved my hands. "It is no fault of mine if everybody does not know it."

She looked again intently at me for a long pause, and then smiled. "Do you think no one can read your secret?"

This was dangerous ground she wished to tread, so I stiffened my back. "Your pardon, Princess, it is neither your gift of penetration

nor the secrets of my life that it will profit us to discuss. Permit me——” as she was about to interrupt. “If you can put yourself in my place, I think you will see I have dealt generously with your brother. He attempted my life at the moment of my arrival; he sought to expose me to the fury of the mob here in Minsk; he came into my room and stole my papers; and now he has been guilty of this infamy against the woman who is to be my cousin’s wife. I hold the proofs of all. And all I did was to tell him frankly—either I must say what I knew and he must meet these charges, or he must leave the country. How otherwise would you have acted in my place?”

With a little pathetic gesture she rose and began to pace the room. “I know. I know,” she cried in a half-wailing tone of pain. “I suppose, like you, I should have had no thought for those whom his ruin would wound. I said you were hard—I call that word back, Mr. Carstairs. You are only just—that cold, merciless word. Just. Just. Just.”

She stood at the end of the room with her back toward me, lifting her arms, and swaying back and forth, as if overcome by her emotion. “It will kill me of shame. Heaven have mercy upon me! That it should come to this!” Then she staggered, and, clutching wildly for support, grasped the bell pull.

I stepped forward to her assistance. “Princess, you are ill.”

She made an effort and rallied and faced me with a smile. But her eyes had a new light in them which I did not understand. "I suppose I have failed," she said, sighing. "We have tried, the Prince and I, to do all we could for you, and now—he will feel the disgrace as keenly as I: more keenly indeed; he is so jealous for the honour of his name."

"No, you have not failed, Princess. Let your brother abandon all idea of this marriage, and what else is to be done shall be decided by you."

She came to me, her face shining as with the light of reawakened hope, and laid her hand on my arm. "You mean that? Oh, it is worthy of you! How shall I thank you? How can I thank you?" And in the excess of her feeling she fell on her knees and laid her head on my arms.

"Princess, Princess! You must not kneel to me."

"You have saved our honour—the honour of us all. I could pour out my heart in gratitude;" and she lifted her head and gazed a moment into my eyes with a look of rapture. Then a change came. She closed her eyes, clasped one hand to her heart, and gasped as if for breath. "I am faint," she whispered. "Help me, help me."

I put my arm round her and helped her to rise. To my profound dismay she threw her arms round my neck and began to sob with hysterical vehemence.

"Princess, for Heaven's sake be calm," I

cried, feeling exceedingly uncomfortable as I tried to unclasp her hands.

But as though unable to stand without support, she still clung tightly to me, resisting the efforts I made to free myself, until suddenly I felt her muscles stiffen, she seized my arms, and wrestling violently as if to break away from me, she at last thrust me off unexpectedly and sprang away, as I staggered back.

"Save me, Gregory, save me," she cried. "He has insulted me and tried to kiss me. You saw."

I turned at the words. Prince Volonesh, with Mirla at his side, stood in the doorway. The Princess, her dress slightly disordered, leaned against the table. She trembled violently, breathing hard in apparent exhaustion, her bosom heaving and lips quivering in intense agitation, and that part of the bosom of her dress which she had disordered was carefully turned toward the Prince.

A piece of superb acting. She was to the life the innocent woman who, surprised by insult, had fought against wrong successfully; and while exhausted by the struggle and bitterly wrathful against the man who had wronged her, had yet a consciousness of shame as the result of the degrading contact.

Of course the trap was plain enough now; and, fool-like, I was enmeshed beyond the possibility of escape. She had contrived this accurately timed stroke so that the Prince

himself would not need her words : his own eyes supplied the evidence.

It was almost diabolical in its cunning, and it left me without a jot of defence. To show myself innocent, I must prove her a liar in his eyes. It was hopeless to think that he would listen to any such story, or credit a word I might say on any other subject. With one rapid, dexterous, brilliant stroke she had destroyed the whole of my case, while at the same time prejudicing me with Mirla.

The only thing for me was to deny and protest, and then accept defeat.

All this flashed upon me in the second's pause of tense silence which followed the Prince's entrance.

The pause was due to the Prince's stunning surprise at the discovery, and the next moment he grew livid with passionate jealousy—she had known which passion to play upon—and he rushed toward me, his hand upraised for a blow.

I awaited the attack steadily. I hoped he would strike me before a word was spoken, as it would put the affair on a better footing for me.

But the Princess saw this also. She raised her hand appealingly to him, and cried : "No, no, Gregory. He is not worth it."

His hand fell to his side. "I nearly forgot," he said in the slow hoarse tone of concentrated passion. "You are my guest."

"I have done nothing to violate the hospi-

talities which your Highness has shown me ! ” I replied firmly. “ That I declare on my honour.”

He had turned partly away ; but at this implied charge of falsehood against his wife he wheeled round, and again his hand clenched in readiness for a blow, his features working with rage. Again the Princess intervened, this time with only a gesture ; and making a supreme effort he controlled himself and turned away.

“ Mirla, go away.”

I looked at her and she returned the look with an expression I could not read, as she hesitated what to do.

“ Do you hear me, Mirla ? ” he said very sternly.

“ I have discovered a scheme that concerns your safety, Countess,” I began, when the Prince cut me short by the summary method of pushing her away pretty roughly along the corridor.

“ Molda,” he said next, “ leave us.”

It was necessary, even if risky, to back up my former protest with an appeal to her “ Princess, I appeal to you to tell his Highness what has really passed here,” I said.

With ready wit she turned this against me. She paused, looked at me with an expression of intense consternation, much as though my words recalled the horror of the imaginary scene, and then with a shudder shrank further from me and seized her husband’s arm.

Go, dearest," he said softly and soothingly.

But she was afraid even then to leave us alone together. She made as if to go, but reeled slightly and dashed her hand to her head. "Not alone, Gregory, not alone," she whispered tenderly, clinging to him as if for support.

"You will of course leave the house at once, sir," he said, turning to me, and clipping his words short in contempt.

"Of course. But on my honour I am foully wronged in this."

He paid no heed, but went out and shut the door upon me.

Then I sat down and—laughed. I had never been so completely outplayed in my life in any matter, great or small, and the humour of it appealed to me for the moment irresistibly.

But the laughter did not last long. Underneath the farce of it all there was grim tragedy for Mirla, and the thought of that made me serious enough.

Moreover, my own position—considering the drastic intentions of the strikers in regard to me—was likely to be awkward enough. Of course the Princess had foreseen this also. I had acquired a very wholesome respect for her capacity, cunning and foresight.

CHAPTER XIV

THE STRIKERS WIN A VICTORY

WHERE was I to go ? Parker's former report that the hotels were not willing to take the risk of receiving me, closed all the usual places. I could probably get some kind of lodgings ; but I could not be blind to the danger I should run in any such place.

Obviously it was the Princess's object to drive me out of the town altogether ; and my first step was equally obvious. I would appear to accept defeat and make a pretence of leaving Minsk that afternoon. My luggage should be packed and labelled for Königsberg ; Parker should spread it amongst the servants that I was going to England ; and all should be done as if in pursuance of this intention.

Meanwhile I must make an effort to see Mirla. She must know of the fresh scheme against her, and I must learn what she proposed to do in view of the scene with the Princess.

I was in the midst of these ruminations when Parker returned and brought with him several items of importance.

In the first place Viralmi had done what I asked and sent me the needed passports for Mirla, Rachel Vologda and myself in false names.

Next, Count Otto's man had given him my own passport, with a lie to the effect that he had found it on the stairs. This move was plain. The Princess thought it prudent to make my departure easy.

Last and best, Rachel Vologda had been waiting for Parker with a letter for me from Mirla.

I tore it open with feverish haste. "I am at the priest's house. Come to me at once for Heaven's sake. M."

"At the priest's house!"

The last place in Minsk where I should have looked for her; and then I saw that it offered the best answer that could be found for the question which had been so perplexing to me—where to stay on leaving the Prince's.

"You are leaving Russia to-day, Parker, by the next train," I said.

"Thank God for that, sir. What time do we start?"

"I didn't say 'we'; 'you.' You had better find out the exact time your train goes. Somewhere about three, I think."

He was helping me to change into my Russian dress, and he turned round with my coat in his hand and stared blankly at me. "What have I done, sir, please?"

"Done? Nothing. What do you mean?"

"Am I discharged, sir?"

"Bless the man, no. But haven't you had enough of the place?"

"Not if you are staying on, sir. It's a fairly warm spot, of course; but if it's not too hot for you, sir, it's not too hot for me: you'll excuse the liberty."

"Do you suppose I call that a liberty? No, no, I call it loyalty. You are as sterling a man as you are a good servant. And that would be hard to beat."

"Thank you, sir; but is it really necessary for me to go?"

"Without a question. Something has occurred here which necessitates my leaving this house at once. I shall figure in this dress for the time I remain in Minsk, and shall have all I can do to look after myself without having to take care of you."

"I think I could do that. I don't stomach leaving you, sir."

"But there's another thing. You may help me by going, and can't possibly do so by staying. Pack up all this; let it be known—not with a flourish, but quietly—that we are leaving by that train; give some *vales* to the servants; and drive off with the luggage to the station. You will travel right through to Königsberg, and wait for me on the *Falcon*."

"Yes, sir." His tone was even more doleful than his look, as he helped me finish my dressing, and then watched me as I hastily completed my preparations. When I gave him the money needed for his journey, he begged again to be allowed to stay.

"My good fellow, I would if I could ; but you are helping me ten times as much by thus leading people off my scent. By the way, there's another little thing you can do. Send this telegram in my name to the two papers here from the frontier station."

I scribbled it out : " I shall be glad if you will announce that I left Minsk by the ——— train and have just passed the frontier, Richard Carstairs." " You can fill in the time of the train."

" Yes, sir ; and when shall we expect you on the yacht ? "

I smiled. " When you hear from me or see me. That's the nearest I can get to it, so far. And now—good-bye ; " and I held out my hand. " A man doesn't often get such a proof of stick-fast loyalty as you have given me to-day. You're a good sort, Parker, right through."

He gave me his hand nervously. " Good-bye, sir."

" Buck up, man, it'll be all right, never fear ; " and then I made my way downstairs and left the house.

It appeared to me as I hurried along to Father Tesla's house as quickly as safety permitted, that the disorder in the town was much greater than even on the previous evening. Crowds of men paraded the streets in open defiance of the police ; meetings were being held in almost every open space and at many of the street corners ; and the police were absolutely powerless—indeed, very few

of them were to be seen, and then only in squads of five or ten in number.

Even the military had ceased to hold the people in awe. I saw one gruesome proof of this in a hand to hand fight when the officer in charge of a body of troops tried to break up a crowd who stood listening to a revolutionary ranter.

The crowd outnumbered the troops by thirty to one ; and, at the first show of force, they deployed very cleverly and, aided by numbers of newcomers who came pouring up from every direction, they surrounded the troops, tore their weapons away, and with a shower of blows and curses sent the soldiers flying in all directions.

The officer was frightfully treated. He stood his ground to the last with dogged courage ; but he was knocked down by a blow from a clubbed rifle, and a whole crowd of the infuriated men set upon him, pounded and struck and mauled him, and then kicked him into the gutter, where every one who passed spat upon him with an oath.

I shuddered at the almost fiendish callousness of this violence ; but to have gone to the man's help would only have been to invite a similar fate for myself ; and with a sickening horror at the scene I hurried on, keenly eager to be out of the place with all possible speed.

The people were fast going mad in their fever for revolution ; and not the least disquieting of my thoughts was the knowledge that had this mob of red-hot devils had but

an inkling that I was the man who had so roused their rage three days before, they would have served me in much the same fashion as they had treated that poor battered devil of an officer.

It is one thing to read of the violence of a mob run mad; it is another to witness it with a full knowledge of how short the odds are that you may not be one of the next victims.

Up to that moment I had been disposed to hold cheaply enough the hostility of the strikers, and to regard them as scarcely more dangerous to me personally than a rough London mob in a bad temper. But the spread of the blood-thirst was too plain to mistake; and I knew that so long as I remained in Minsk, I should be carrying my life in my hands.

"You look very worried," was Mirla's greeting.

"Don't you think that business at the Prince's enough to make me?"

"Oh, how infamous it was of her!"

"You don't believe it, then?"

She put out her hand in impulsive protest.

"Don't even ask me such a question."

"Good," I said, as my fingers closed on hers.

"I dared not say a word, or there would have been difficulty about my leaving the house. As it was, I had really to run away before Molda got downstairs. I would not even go home, because I thought they would

come after me ; and Rachel suggested this house."

" I think you have done right. Of course, after what has just happened, it is perfectly clear that the Princess is running the thing ; and I got it out of Count Otto that the next move is to call yesterday's story a delusion on your part, and treat that delusion as the result of insanity."

She laughed. " She had already prepared the Prince for something of the kind. I had just arrived at the house, and as soon as I began to speak to him he dropped a hint of that. I thought it best to say no more until you should be present to bear me out, when a servant brought word that Molda must see him instantly in your room about me. He took me up with him and then——"

" The deluge," said I, as she paused.

" What am I to do ? " she asked, a moment later.

" Have you any friends to whom you can go, and with whom you will be a bit safer ? "

" I have a cousin," she answered, in a matter-of-fact tone.

" Can you get at her easily ? "

" Oh yes." This readily : then with a smile she added : " But it's not a ' her.' "

" Close at hand ? "

" In one sense, no ; in another, yes."

" Cryptic, that. Where does he live ? "

She paused and let her eyes rest on mine.

" It's my cousin—Dick."

" Oh ! "

"Yes. He lives in England."

"Dare you?"

"If you'll take me, I'll dare anything—and if you think it best."

"Till we're over the frontier we shan't have time to think about anything, except how to get there. You'll have to rough it, you know."

"I should love it."

"And you can't travel in that kind of dress."

"Rachel will see to that."

"Oh, then you'd arranged all this before I came?"

"Yes," she nodded. "Rachel and I are going in any case. I can have all my trunks sent after me. You need not pretend to look dubious, because I can see you're pleased."

"It's a strong step; but I think my cousin would wish it."

She laughed and shook her head. "I can't see him in this; but anyhow we must begin to make preparations. Here's my costume. Rachel and I were busy on it when you arrived. She's worth her weight in roubles, that girl."

It was one of Rachel's own dresses of some sort of brown material, and every bit of frill and ribbon had been taken off. She held it up against her dainty figure, her face smiling as she looked down at it and then up at me. "A nice serviceable colour," she said; then she tossed it down and picked up a shawl and threw it across her shoulders and put on a

hat, which finished the costume. "I'm going to wear my hair brushed right back and plastered down. How will London like the hat?"

"They would pardon any old sort of hat for the sake of the face that is under it just now."

She flushed slightly. "That's not a bit like a frank cousinly speech, I'm sure. They don't pay silly compliments;" and she tossed the things aside.

"We must keep the dress that my cousin may see in what fashion you make your triumphal exit from Minsk."

"I think—I'm not sure—but I *think* I can imagine his horror."

To switch her off that subject, I asked: "How long will it take you to get ready?"

She turned, looked up at me as though my question was a sort of censure, and put her hand on my arm, "You're not angry that I try to make light of this? Don't think because I laugh and jest that I don't know how much you have done for me, how much I owe you and——"

"Please."

"I must, Dick. Your question makes me. You must know that I never pass a minute without heartfelt thanks for such a friend. And when I think of that horrible scene at the Prince's to-day, and the shame that was put upon you so infamously, and that it all came out of what you did for me last night, I feel, oh—well, perhaps I shall be able to tell you some day all that's in my heart about it.

I can't now and—oh, I should hate myself if I didn't think of that some day."

"My dear Countess——"

"Let it be Mirla now, Dick. It can't be Countess in that dress, nor Mr. Carstairs in yours. Let it be just Mirla and Dick—why, Rachel will have to call us that in the train."

"Mirla, then."

"That's better."

"I can guess pretty well how you feel ; and some day when we are all safe and at ease we shall have time to talk it all over. Now we ought to be getting ready."

"That's better. Treat it with a laugh—for the present ;" and acting up to her words, she ran to the door with a laugh and called Rachel.

I turned away to hunt among the priest's books for a time-table, and unwittingly must have sighed at thoughts which were not for her knowing.

"Did you sigh ?" she asked, recrossing the room.

"I don't know. One does these things at times," I answered lightly.

She bent her eyes searchingly upon me. "What made you ? What were you thinking ?"

"My dear Mirla, a sigh is merely an indication that the lungs require a little extra oxygen, and such a house as this——"

"Don't," she cried. "You hurt me."

In the pause Rachel came in ; and I was glad of the break.

A railway guide was found; and while I hunted up the time of our train, Mirla went away to dress.

"Will this do?" she asked on her return, her eyes brimful of fun and suppressed laughter, and her features as prim as those of a Quakeress.

"Your eyes are too laughterful for a Russian woman's just now, that's all. It's just magnificent. But it doesn't."

"Doesn't?" she repeated. "How foolish. Doesn't what?"

"I'll tell you in—in about five hours' time, when the dress and the wearer will be safe across the frontier."

"I want to know now," she insisted, with her characteristic little stamp of the foot.

"Doesn't hide your beauty." And at that Rachel laughed.

We met with no obstacles in the streets on our way to the station, although they were crowded as thickly as ever. We were just three ordinary Russians of the lower class, and nobody questioned us or our movements.

At the station we had to be careful that Mirla was not recognized; and, leaving the two in a corner apart from the crowd, I went for the tickets.

It was close to the time for the train; but the booking office was not open, although many people were clamouring round it. I took my place in the queue and waited some minutes.

Then a loud noise in another part of the

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room, followed by mingled cheers, cries of dismay, and imprecations.

An official holding a large placard in his hand was forcing his way to the grill where the tickets were given out.

I shouldered a path through the crowd, and read the placard just as he was about to fasten it up.

My heart fell.

All traffic was suspended, as the line had been seized by the strikers.

Our escape was cut off.

Before the placard was fixed in its place, some one rushed to the doorway and yelled the news to those outside at the top of his stentorian voice.

It was hailed like the bulletin of a great war victory. Throngs of people came scurrying stationwards from all directions, and in a few moments the approach to the building was a seething sea of wildly excited humanity—a hustling, tossing, gesticulating, howling mob, gone mad with jubilant excitement at the triumphant coup of the strikers.

The Marseillaise was started and caught up everywhere, men and women alike shouting, whooping and yelling in discordant accord with the hymn of blood, those in the fore-ranks worked up until they began to dance a sort of wild Carmagnole in a fierce ecstasy that beggared description.

CHAPTER XV

REVOLUTIONARIES ONCE MORE

IN the maelstrom of maddened excitement and tumult, I was returning to Mirla when I observed a little independent whirlpool of people clamouring round one of the railway officials. They were eager to know when a train would start next ; and I heard him protesting with angry volubility that neither he nor any one else could say when traffic would be resumed.

Mirla had of course read the news and understood its significance to us ; but she had a very stout heart and met me with a quite cheerful smile. " Unfortunate, isn't it ? Just a train too late," she said.

" Yes, it's a bit of a nuisance, but we must find a way out somehow," I replied, my tone much easier than my thoughts.

" What had we better do ? "

" We could tell better if we knew what this ramping mob meant to do. The officials don't know when the next train will start ; but I expect the military will soon be on the spot and I hope recapture the line. Meanwhile——" I stopped with a shrug of the shoulders.

" It's almost a pity I am not that other

Mirla—I suppose I might be able to get a special train—from my comrades,” she said.

The audacity of the suggestion! Do you mean that you would really dare?”

“I would do anything to get us all out of Minsk to-night. You told them last night I was passing through.”

“A daring coup of the kind will often win where a timid one would fail. But there must be some one in Minsk who knows her by sight, or knows you.”

“That thought gave me an awful moment and nearly froze the blood in my veins last night when you called me forward. But no one did. I shouldn’t be so afraid the second time.”

I thought a moment and shook my head. “It won’t do. I’d risk it in another town; but not here—except in the last resort. I have a better plan. Horses. Vilna is only about a hundred miles; we could reach there on horseback in two days, or at most three.”

“There is Rachel,” said Mirla.

“True. I had forgotten. But we could drive.”

“I have horses in my stable that would do it in two days.”

“And leave a plain trail for others to follow?”

“My turn to forget,” she said with a smile.

“It is so puzzling.”

“I should think it will be easy enough to get horses, and we might be able to make a start almost as soon as it is light.”

"And meanwhile?"

"Father Tesla's, for you. If we can't get out of the town, he can't get back into it. So that after all we're in luck. I'll take you and Rachel there and then buy, borrow or beg the horses, and let you know when all is ready."

"I suppose I dare not go home?"

"You see you are running away in defiance of the Emperor's withdrawal of the permit—a strong weapon for the Prince."

"I know, but——"

"Well?"

"What will you do to-night? Where will you go?"

I laughed, that she might not see how this proof of her solicitude touched me. "I shall be more than all right. My friend among the strikers will look after that. Besides, I shall have plenty——"

"Ah, that is like what I have heard of you, sister. To stand by observing quietly the people's victory which your efforts have done so much to help."

It was the man from Vilna, Maxim Suvalski, who had been so prominent the night before.

Mirla started in some dismay at the interruption and two little spots of colour signalled her confusion. But as he spoke she pulled herself together and answered him calmly.

"It is an achievement; but nothing to what is to come. The day will come when every railway in the Empire will be as this—in the hands of the people."

"You believe that?" he cried eagerly.

"I have said it," she replied, with an air of conviction, which completely covered the equivocation of the words.

"You are wonderful," he exclaimed. I agreed with him.

"Yet for myself I could almost regret the victory did not come an hour later. I was going to Vilna, and then farther on."

She was going to play for that special train. "The means will yet be found, sister," I put in, anxious to be included in the conversation. Direct lies might have to be told soon, and I must save Mirla from telling them.

Suvalski looked at me inquiringly. "Also a brother?" he asked Mirla.

"Look well at me and you will see," said I.

"I have never seen you before," he declared positively after a good stare.

My disguise of the previous night must have been a good one. I assumed the higher voice of the priest, "'Tis a good disguise that deceives the keen-eyed Maxim Suvalski."

"Not the priest of last night?" he cried, his surprise complete.

"The hounds are hot on my scent; so I have let them catch—my beard and my gown."

He wrung my hand and laughed. "It is marvellous," he exclaimed. Apart from his strike politics he appeared to be a good enough fellow; but his presence at that moment was embarrassing to the point of disaster.

"Our friends are delighted," he said, turning to Mirla, as a louder yell than usual went

up from the mob outside. "There will be doings in the town to-night, or I am no judge of things. You know that several attacks have long been arranged ; and that a large body of troops was to have come down to-night from Vilna. But this will stop them."

"I told you that urgent reasons made it imperative that our sister's presence in Minsk should not be known. She has had no interviews with any of the local leaders."

"And must have none," she declared, in a tone of firm decision. "The whole success or failure of my present undertaking depends upon absolute secrecy."

"A great stroke is to be dealt against the accursed rich here in Minsk ; and now that the troops cannot get here, it will be dealt no doubt to-night. Their houses will be sacked. I do not know the people ; but you will know the names, Father ;" and he rattled off a dozen names including Prince Volonesh ; and then asked Mirla : "And who, do you think, is the last ?"

"I do not know."

Again he paused and this time smiled : "Your own."

I caught my breath, thinking we were discovered ; but Mirla's face was unmoved and her voice as even as a spirit level : "You mean the Countess Mirla Gorkov's ?"

"It was the similarity of the name decided it. Before the night is over she will have cause to repent it, aristocrat though she is."

I reversed my mental opinion about his

being a good fellow ; and for the chuckle of unholy glee with which he said this, I should have liked to take him by the throat and strangle him.

" I have heard of her," said Mirla quietly.

" If they capture her, you two should meet, face to face," he declared, with laughing delight at the idea.

" It would be dramatic," said I.

Mirla was more prudent. " I do not allow any one to dictate my movements," she asserted, coldly. " I have heard that the Countess has done much for the poor of Minsk."

" In charity, you mean. What is the charity of the rich but an insult—a mere show of giving the crumbs when the whole loaf is the people's by right. Thank God we shall soon be done with it ! "

" You speak of property, brother, I of life. But I have no voice in the counsels of the Minsk leaders, and seek none. Meanwhile the work I have to do is waiting, and I am here, helpless," she said, with a gesture of regret.

" No, no, do not regret, sister. Blood will flow to-night : and the example of popular force here will give more heart to the revolution in other cities than even your stirring words and glorious work. But even that need not be delayed so long as you think. Some of us must return to Vilna, and to-morrow a train will run. You will travel with us ? "

"Of course," Mirla's coolness was a constant cause of marvel to me. "At what hour to-morrow?"

"It is not yet settled. Where can I let you know?"

"At my house," I answered.

"But my whereabouts must be secret, brother," said Mirla, with a ring of authority. "And the Father and my companion will travel with me."

At that moment some one spoke to Suvalski, and we three left the station.

"Oh, my beautiful home!" cried Mirla, in distress.

"Thank God you are not going to be in it! But Prince Volonesh? Ought we not to try and get a warning to him?"

"I think he is well prepared. Attempts have been made before, and he has a large household, all fully armed and drilled. But is it not truly awesome? The people are mad. I have given more than half my income to them, and now not one of them dare lift a hand against this outrage, the sole reason for which is my name."

It was clear that the people were mad for destruction. On our way through the streets we saw many acts of violence. Shops were broken open and the contents looted and strewn on the ground. Houses were fired in sheer wantonness of riot. Mob law prevailed. Bodies of men marched where they would, their course marked by havoc and ruin and pillage; and the sky shone red in half a dozen



" Shops were broken open and the contents looted and
strewn on the ground."

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directions with the fiendish glare of incendiarism.

Every now and again came the scream of fright as some quarry was put up ; the shouts of the hunt followed and the scurrying clatter of heavy feet in pursuit ; a sharp piercing cry for mercy, a shriek of pain, a groan or two, to end with the raucous yells of triumph over another " victory " of the people.

A dozen times we were caught in the eddying swirls of some of these blood hunts ; thrust this way, that way, any way ; now dashed against the house fronts, next scrambling in the gutter, struggling and striving in imminent peril of being trampled to death in the blind mob rush ; and then tossed aside almost contemptuously, as though we were beneath the notice of this boiling surf of infuriated democracy rushing blood-crazed and plunder-bent toward some object worthier of its might.

It was a night full of horrors ; and no one could say that, as the city was now at the strikers' mercy, matters would not be far worse on the morrow.

That we reached the priest's house safe and unhurt we had every reason to be intensely thankful. We were all awestruck and stunned by the horrors. I had been in tight places before, and pretty close to death ; but never before had I faced the cyclonic passion of a mob hot with the desire for violence and armed with the power to do it. I hope I am not a coward ; but as we crept into the dark house

and I closed and bolted the door behind us, I was trembling and quivering like a sheep with excitement and alarm.

Rachel fainted the instant we were in safety ; and Mirla declared afterwards that she must have fainted also, had she not had to bestir herself to revive Rachel.

Our plight was about as bad as it could be. We were trespassers in another man's house. That man, as Viralmi had shown me, was a suspect in the eyes of the local strike leaders ; and apparently my only hope of personal safety was to personate him. Mirla was a fugitive, alike from her friends, the Government, and the strikers ; and should her identity be discovered by the latter, she would inevitably become an object of popular hatred and violence. Rachel as a Jewess had already been chased for her life, when the storm was only murmuring which to-night was raging in full blast.

Had it been possible I would have faced the risks of the streets again to get Mirla to Prince Volonesh's house ; but I knew it was useless. If we succeeded in reaching the house, it would only be to find it fast shut and barricaded against the mob who were probably attacking it even at that minute. Her own house was impossible for the same reason.

It was almost equally futile to attempt to carry out my first suggestion of getting horses. To seek for them on such a night seemed about as promising as to dig for diamonds in a cinder hill.

The only other plan I could think of was to wait until some of the tumult had died down and then set out to walk to the nearest village and try to get horses there to carry us farther. But even if Mirla had been capable of such an effort, Rachel certainly was not ; and to abandon her now was out of the question.

There was nothing for it, therefore, but to remain where we were for the night ; so I sent the two off to bed declaring that I would keep watch until I considered it safe to go out in search of horses and some kind of vehicle.

I kept my vigil until about two hours after midnight, and then, as the tumult appeared to have died down a little, I thought of another plan—to try and find Viralmi and seek his help in getting us out of the city. Choosing a stout stick which belonged to the priest, I slipped my revolver into my pocket, closed the door after me quietly, and started on my quest.

CHAPTER XVI

THE PRINCESS AGAIN

I FELT exceedingly depressed and was consumed with anxiety at the parlous position into which I had brought Mirla. We hear of two-o'clock-in-the-morning courage ; and I can testify to two-o'clock-in-the-morning depression. It was positively nerve racking.

In the hours of my solitary watch I had gone carefully over the whole progress of events which had led to the present crisis ; and although I could only put my finger definitely on one step which I should not take again were the conditions to recur, I was unable to shake off the feeling that I had made a horrible mess of the whole matter.

I was responsible for it all. I alone. And if any means were to be devised for getting Mirla out of the web of danger which encircled her, it was I who must devise them. And yet when it was above all things essential that I should think of some plan, my wits were as heavy as lead in their unresponsiveness.

That with the best intentions in the world I had only succeeded in plunging Mirla into a peril which threatened even her life, seemed

to render me mentally blind. I could not see the length of my nose in front of me.

I could think of only two things, and both were but crude : one was to find some means which would enable us to get out of the city ; the other to find some lodging which would be less dangerous than Father Tesla's house.

The one serious mistake I had made was the attempt to fly with Mirla. I saw clearly enough now that I ought to have discountenanced that and advised her, instead, to remain and meet Count Otto's persecution and the Princess's by legal methods—using the proof we possessed of his theft.

But even in that I could plead a fair defence. I could not anticipate the seizure of the railway by the strikers, without which we should already have been safe from pursuit. While if she had remained at home, she would have been in danger from the mob on one hand and from the Princess on the other.

There was little use in looking back, however. I must do something to get her into safety ; and the only man in all Minsk who could help me was Viralmi.

I did think once, indeed, of going to Prince Volonesh ; but I put away the idea for the time. I was stayed, not by any consideration of the personal unpleasantness to myself of such a step, but by the reflection that Mirla herself must be consulted beforehand. I resolved to try Viralmi first.

I had a touch of good luck at the outset. I was standing at the door of his house hesita-

ting how to wake up the inmates, for the place was all dark, when a man gripped my shoulder and demanded what I wanted.

It was Viralmi himself; and he did not recognize me in my Russian dress. "I am looking for you, Viralmi," I said.

"Good heavens, Mr. Carstairs! What on earth does this mean?"

"I'm in a pretty bad mess and must speak to you."

He took me to his room and I saw by the lamplight as he stooped to kindle it, that his face was white and his features drawn as if with suffering.

"What is it?" he asked, breaking the silence.

"Partly the result of this night's work," I answered.

He closed his eyes and threw up his hands despairingly with a deep drawn sigh. "I am sick body and soul at the sight of it," he said, too earnestly for me to question his sincerity.

"Yet you have preached it and worked for it."

"True, true, my God, quite true. It had to be. The chains of the despot could not be unshackled without it—violence, looting, aye, and bloodshed, even. It never has been in all the world's history—even your own country. But the sight of it, the actual contact, thrills me with horror."

"Well, it's to get you to prevent some more of it that brings me here."

"You? You are no longer in danger. Your one act is forgotten by now, buried under this avalanche of loosened passion. Besides, you can walk the streets safely in that garb—if I did not recognize you, who is likely to do so?"

"But I am not alone; and—and there are other reasons."

He threw a quick startled glance at me. "Tell me."

"You pledge your honour to keep what I tell you secret even if you find you can't help me?"

"On my honour, I will not only keep your secret but I *will* help you at any personal risk."

I told him so much as I thought necessary of the position and what had led to it; and he listened closely, only interrupting me once—when I described how I had led Mirla to personate the "Little Anarchist."

"You were mad, mad, mad," he cried, in great agitation. "Stark staring mad to do it. How could you? How could you?"

"What would you have done?"

"Anything but that; anything in the world," he exclaimed.

"Yes, but what thing in particular?"

"Why, if the deception had been discovered they would have torn you both limb from limb! You have seen to-night what a mob will do."

"They were going to do that anyway."

"Think of the danger you yourself ran."

Of course we heard of the affair : and the very act you did, saved that infernal priest, Tesla, from being called before the strike leaders. That speech of yours, proclaiming him on our side, alone delayed the summons."

"Anyway I did it, and here's the result ;" and I finished my story.

"Those two women are actually in the priest's house at this moment ? Why, but for that affair, it would have been sacked this very night. Ah, Mr. Carstairs, you don't understand the terrible force that you are playing with so lightheartedly."

"I think I'm learning the lesson," I replied, drily. "But now, here's the mess ; can you help to get us out ?"

He thrust his fingers through his hair and walked up and down the room. He was intensely excited.

"The Countess will cease this personation ?"

"Of course. It was only attempted in the emergency. I tell you I want to get away or else to find a safe shelter for her. Get her into safety, and I'll manage to look after myself."

"I could get you horses easily enough, dozens of them but——" he shook his head, "a hundred wouldn't help your case."

"Why not ?"

"Don't you know that martial law has been proclaimed for the whole district : and no one can move without a permit. Neither police nor military would touch you just at the

moment in the town itself, for fear of the strikers, but the moment you were outside you would be stopped."

"We're between the devil and the deep sea then?" I exclaimed, very crestfallen at the news.

"No, no. You must get the Countess and the girl to a place of safety, until the storm is over. I have thought of a refuge—the Convent of Beatitudes, a little way outside the city on the Vilna road. They will be quite safe there. Whatever happens, such buildings will not be touched."

"Can we go at once? I am on the rack every minute the Countess remains in this hazard."

He shook his head. "Not yet. The Vilna road leads right past her own house and——" he paused with a significant shrug and lifting of the heavy eyebrows.

"You mean her house has been attacked and looted?"

"I raised my voice against it to the last, at the risk of jeopardising my influence, for I know of the many grand and generous things she has done. But there is a point where moderation's hands are palsied. She has rank and is rich, and that is enough for my passion-blinded brethren."

"You should think of the whirlwind before you sow the wind, Viralmi."

"No, no, a thousand noes!" he cried enthusiastically. "Russia must be freed though the streets run with blood, and our

own, mine and yours, go to feed the current. It is history—aye, it is fate.”

“Yet you sicken at the sight of it in a street riot.”

“Is the physical repugnance of one man to such a sight to call a halt to the movement which means the freedom of millions? Heaven knows I would not harm a dumb animal wilfully; but I swear that if freedom could come no other way, I would take a knife and plunge it to the heart of every woman or child who impeded it.”

“That’s all right for talk, but I don’t believe you. About the Countess, however?”

“She must not venture near her house while there is a chance of the mob being there to recognize her. Some time in the morning, seven or eight o’clock, probably, would be safe. I will go out and see and will let you know at Tesla’s house. For yourself, come back to me here as soon as you have left her at the Convent.”

We parted at his door: he to reconnoitre; I to return to the house.

The dawn was beginning to break when I resumed my watch.

The talk with Viralmi had eased my mind. When once Mirla’s safety was secured, I had little doubt that I could safely lie hid until the first violence of the trouble had passed. It was almost certain, indeed, that the Government of Petersburg would make a very strenuous effort to repress the rising in a place so close to the capital, and when once a sem-

blance of order was restored, we could decide whether to continue the flight from the city or take other means to protect Mirla.

My chief fear now was lest Suvalski or some local strike leader from him might come to the house, as the former had promised to do when the time of the train to Vilna had been decided. I had but one consuming desire—to get Mirla to that Convent.

As the light strengthened I scanned every passer curiously, lest any should be coming to the house. There were plenty of them ; and most bore evidences of the mob's doings in the form of loot of some kind or other with which they were scurrying home. Men and women and even children went by in a constant string—none empty-handed, and some so laden that they staggered under the weight of their burdens.

The priest's house stood at the corner of intersecting streets ; so that the stream passed both ways. But not one of them, man or woman, cast so much as a glance at it. The rising had brought good to them, and they were eager to get their plunder to a safe hiding place.

About six o'clock the string weakened. Either the broad daylight had called a halt, or the looting was over for the time.

At seven I began to grow impatient for Viralmi's return. I roused the others and when Rachel came down I asked her to prepare some breakfast.

Soon Mirla joined me ; and I told her what

I had done in the night and what Viralmi had suggested. Her objection was that it did not provide for my safety ; but I would not listen to this. Viralmi would look after me, I was sure, I said.

Eight o'clock came without his arrival ; and any minute now might bring Suvalski to hurry us to the station. Another hour of intolerable suspense dragged along ; and then I decided to take the risk of starting without him. He had surely forgotten that Suvalski was to come to us.

"We will trust to our disguises to get us through," I said. "This is about the time when things will be quietest. Yesterday's tumult has probably ceased and to-day's not yet begun."

"Something may have happened to your friend, and in that case you will not have anywhere to go."

"Anywhere will be better than this house," was my answer.

Her face clouded. "I don't like it."

"Please believe I can take good care of myself."

I prevailed after some further demur from her, and we started.

The city was much quieter. The mob were apparently in bed holding aching heads, for *vodka* had been drunk like water, nursing sore limbs, or planning fresh outrages. Whatever the cause, comparatively few people were abroad. Even the police ventured to show themselves, and we were in quite as much

danger from them as from the strikers. We were stopped once by two of them and might have had trouble if they had not proved amenable to reason—gold reason.

“Your permits,” one demanded, thinking it safe no doubt to stop two women and one man. I guessed it was merely an attempt to levy blackmail.

“What permits?” I asked.

“To be in the streets.”

“Here they are;” and I took out two gold pieces, one for each of them.

“Are you trying to bribe us?”

“No, I only want to make you a bet.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ll bet you those pieces you can’t read the dates on them.”

“That’s easy—1885,” said the first.

“Mine’s 1897,” declared the other, laughing.

“You have won. They are yours. Now I’ll make you another bet;” and I took out four more coins. “There has been a change in the law which makes it right for us to be out in daylight. I’ll bet you these four against the two you have won that you can’t remember it.”

They looked at each other, laughed and winked. But they understood.

“The odds are too small,” said he who had first spoken.

“I’ll make it four to one each.”

“I remember it now,” he said, and his companion nodded. “I’m sorry I stopped you.”

I paid over the money and they turned away pocketing it with a laugh. "What a blessing they had good memories," I said as we hurried on. But we were not long out of one bother before we were into another.

The main Vilna Road in which Mirla's house stood started from the centre of the city and as we turned into it, both Mirla and I drew a breath of relief.

"We both have the same thought, I believe," I said.

"Mine was relief that we were probably through the worst."

"So was mine. I think we shall win. I'd give something for a carriage."

"We're safer on foot, I think," replied Mirla; then with a start she added, "Ah, soldiers."

"They won't bother us. I suppose the authorities wish to make some show of force after last night's terrors; but it's a very tiny show—worse than none at all, too, it seems."

There were not more than forty or fifty infantry in all; and hanging on to their heels was a fair-sized crowd calling to some of the soldiers, by name, jeering others and making rough fun of the whole thing.

The soldiers were in the middle of the street, and such vehicles as were about drew to the kerb to let them pass; but the crowd took the pavements as well as the roadway, and to avoid them we three stood back in the doorway of a shop.

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The demeanour of the crowd showed that they were quite ready to renew the disturbances when the chance came ; and a good deal of confusion was caused as soon as the soldiers had passed and the vehicles began to thread their way slowly through the people.

“ We can go on now,” I said, when the pavement cleared ; and we were just starting when a sharp exclamation drew our attention to a carriage right against the kerb by us.

“ Mirla, Mirla ! ” came in a tone of intense astonishment.

It was the Princess with Count Otto at her side.

CHAPTER XVII

FROM "CRUCIFY!" TO "HOSANNA!"

MIRLA saw the Princess at the same moment as I; and after a fleeting glance of indecision, her face wore the same set, cold, resolute expression I had noticed in the critical seconds of our encounter with the strikers. Her eyes were fixed on the Princess as Count Otto opened the carriage door for her, and she crossed the pavement to us. He remained standing by the carriage.

Of me the Princess took no notice, for it turned out neither she nor Count Otto had recognized me in the Russian costume, believing that Mirla and Rachel were alone.

"Thank Heaven you are safe, Mirla," she cried with a smile, and in a tone suggesting that Mirla's well-being was the one wish of her heart.

"From what, Princess?" The retort came cutting and keen as a knife edge.

"From the strikers, of course. We have just driven to your house; the mob have destroyed it almost utterly. How did you escape?"

"I have far worse enemies than the strikers—as your Highness knows. If you refer to

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them, I join you in thanking Heaven for my escape.”

“We heard that Countess Ribolsk and the others had escaped; but nothing of you. All last night we were nearly dead with anxiety about you,” replied the Princess, ignoring the thrust.

“I have had too many disastrous proofs of that anxiety to thank you for it.”

“How strange you are, Mirla!”

“I intend to be always a stranger to your Highness.” Mirla said this with all the dignity of an offended queen.

The Princess laughed to cover her chagrin. “‘Your Highness,’ ‘Princess’—how absurd you are. What do you mean?”

Mirla’s lip curled. “I mean what you do not—the truth.”

“You must explain this. You don’t know what you are saying. That wretched Englishman has set you against us all. You know how vilely he behaved.” Mirla started as if to retort, but checked herself. “Thank Heaven he has gone and taken his villainous intrigues with him. Otto has proof that he was only an impostor, after all; probably Sir Andrew Carstairs’ valet, masquerading in his master’s place. The fellow with him confessed as much just before he left.”

Mirla smiled. “If only your power to harm equalled the venom of your tongue, you might be really dangerous. Instead of that, you are merely contemptible.”

“You are mad to speak like this to me.

You must come back with me in the carriage and see the Prince."

"I know of your plan to have others think me mad. I will not come with you. I will never willingly enter your house again."

"Nonsense, I insist, Mirla, for your own safety;" and she laid hold of Mirla's arm as if to lead her to the carriage. Seeing the gesture, Rachel pressed close to her side. "And who is your companion?" cried the Princess, indicating Rachel.

"I am," I said quietly, taking a step forward.

She turned at the sound of my voice, glared hard at me as if unable to trust her ears, and with profound astonishment left go of Mirla and fell back. "Mr. Carstairs!" she cried.

Not without a smile I noticed that Count Otto had overheard this and got back into the carriage. "Mr. Carstairs, yes. Not my cousin's valet. Mirla will not go to your house, Princess."

"Mirla?" she repeated, her eyes lighting as her brows went up.

"Mirla will not go to your house, Princess." I repeated, dwelling intentionally on the christian name. "She has no intention of putting herself in your power in any such way."

"Ah, she prefers your—protection," she sneered, with just enough emphasis on the word to point the insult, without the leer that accompanied it.

Had she but been a man! "She prefers

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not to see the inside of a madhouse. That is one reason.”

“The others are, of course, personal to yourself.”

“Shall we go on, Mr. Carstairs?” interposed Mirla. “This person’s abuse, like her intrigue, is only worthy of a woman of vulgar origin.”

I did not know the full sting of these words, but their effect was instantly apparent. I don’t think I have ever seen a woman more bitterly furious than the Princess at that thrust. Her face went pallid although her eyes flamed as she glared at Mirla; she trembled like one with an ague; and her lips quivered with such rage that although she put herself in Mirla’s way she was unable to speak.

In the pause Count Otto spoke from the carriage.

“Molda, you had better come. The mob seems to be forming, and I don’t like the look of things.”

A glance showed me that he was right, and the prospect pleased me no better. Where the people had come from no one could say; but the street, which had been comparatively empty before the soldiers had marched through, was fast filling, and the crowd in the direction in which we were going, was gathering like leaves in an autumn gale after frost.

The Princess answered her brother with an impatient side movement of the head, as

Mirla and she looked fixedly at each other.

"You shall come home with me, Mirla," said the Princess at last.

"No. The foulest haunt in the city is morally a cleaner place than your house, and a safer one for me."

"You shall come home with me. You shall."

"Molda, do you hear? Are you mad? Come," called Count Otto.

Driven by the need for haste and desperate at the thought that Mirla, having been found, was thus likely to escape from her again, the Princess made a last and reckless effort to force her way. "If you do not come with me this instant it shall cost you and your English friend your lives. The imposture by which you escaped from the strikers the night before last shall be told to them——"

She was interrupted by the sound of a smash not far up the street, followed by shouting and hooting. A carriage had been stopped by the mob, the horses were down and the inmates were dragged out.

"Molda, for God's sake, come," cried Count Otto.

Another shout was raised and some of the mob came running in our direction. There was, indeed, no time to lose. With a last look of hate at Mirla, she ran quickly across the pavement and jumped in. Much as I detested the woman I did not wish to see her mauled by the rabble, so I helped her in and shut the door behind her.

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A little act of misplaced courtesy that cost us dear.

The carriage dashed away at a rapid pace just before the foremost of the mob reached us, and with a howl of disappointment and rage they closed round us, threatening us alike with voices and clubs and fists, demanding to know who were in the carriage; why I had helped them to escape; and who we were; with fifty other questions, all yelled at us at once to an accompaniment of groans and shouts of execration.

We were all three seized and I was pommelled and sworn at, and found myself, to my consternation, being forced gradually away from Mirla and Rachel, who stood back against a house wall hemmed in by a cluster of gesticulating roughs.

At first I made no attempt at resistance and contented myself with shouting that I was as good an anarchist as any of them. I might as well have shouted at a stormy sea. Instead of appeasing them, the uproar increased, until a big hairy brute raised his heavy club and struck viciously at my head.

By good luck I was able to dodge the blow and before he could raise it for another I grappled with him, tore the club from his hand and laid about me right and left to such good effect that those close by fell back, half a dozen of them with cause to rub head or limb, while I pushed my way back toward Mirla.

I was just nearing her when one of the beasts

thrust his arm about her waist and with a laugh and an oath tried to kiss her.

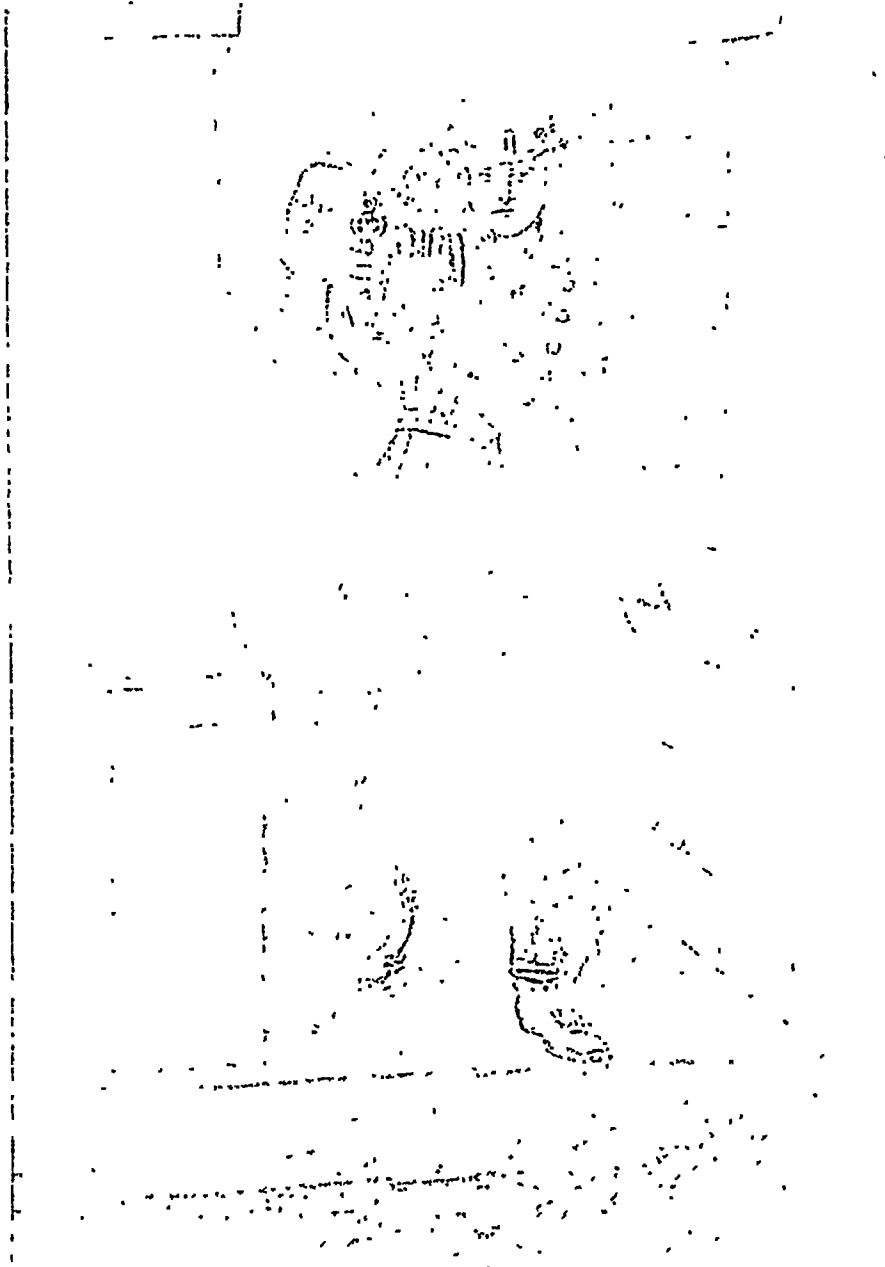
This just maddened me. I dashed through the three or four who stood between me and her, and as she was struggling in the filthy fellow's embrace, I let the club drop and seized him. He was only a loathsome weakling; and I shook him till his teeth rattled like castanets and flung him full in to the midst of the excited throng.

Then I sent my fist into the face of the man who was holding Rachel and pushing them back into a doorway, I whipped out my revolver: "Get back," I cried, beside myself with rage. "The man who tries to touch us shall have this, by God."

That we were not seized and either clubbed or trampled to death there and then has always been a source of wonder to me. There must have been two or three hundred furious, rage-distorted, villainous faces glaring at us, and those who had seen my treatment of their comrades sent up a yell of rage, which the whole mob echoed.

Those in front must have read my look to mean that I would keep my word, however, and each man cared too much for his dirty skin to risk it by coming close to my revolver. That, and the fact that we stood in a doorway, a step above the crowd, thus being at an advantage, probably saved our lives.

In a crisis of that kind, everybody who has been through one knows that the first moments are those of real danger. Each second of



"Pushing them back into a doorway, I whipped out
my revolver."

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delay helps the fickle temper of a mob to change. Nothing is more contagious than fear; and I knew that every instant which passed without any one man daring to lead an attack, was worth untold gold in increasing the fear of my weapon and the reluctance to face the death it threatened.

The yells continued; but they had less viciousness in them. With infinite pleasure I noticed that those on the outskirts of the mob began to straggle away; a second later a shout was raised away down the street, followed by the crash of breaking glass and the screams of women.

Never did I breathe a deeper sigh of more intense relief than when I saw the bulk of the crowd stream away in the direction of the new excitement, leaving only half a dozen stragglers to threaten and jeer at us.

As I was armed, I was not afraid of these, so I told Mirla we had better go. But even as I stepped out of the doorway that had stood us in such good stead, the luck turned against us.

The fresh excitement had proved short-lived and the crowd came running back to bait us again, whooping and shouting as if to some rare sport. I stepped back therefore and waited.

But the conditions were changed now. Among those who came up were two or three men of a very different kind; and amid the cheers of the crowd, a way was made for them to the front.

"Why are you threatening the people?" asked one.

"Because they nearly killed me," I answered.

"Put that weapon away."

"I'll use it on the first man that attempts to touch me."

"Are you an enemy of the people?"

"No."

"Then you have no need to use that. I ask you again to put it away."

"The safety of these two women makes that impossible."

The crowd hooted. But he quelled them instantly, by simply holding up his hand. He was a little man; but stood high in authority, as we learnt later, when we heard his name. Drogoff.

"For the last time I ask you" he said to me.

"No."

There was an instant's pause. "Then you must shoot me," he said, in a quiet, commonplace tone. With the utmost deliberation but without a falter he walked straight up to me keeping his eyes fixed steadily on mine the whole time.

I couldn't shoot a man in cold blood; so I lowered the revolver and just met his steady look.

Seeing this, the mob broke out again and began a rush across the pavement. But he checked them again.

"It is said that you helped a cursed aristocrat to escape."

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“What I did was to help a woman into a carriage and close the door after her.”

“Who was she?”

“The Princess Volonesh.”

Those who heard this hooted, and such a groan went up as he was powerless to silence.

“You will answer for this,” he said; and turning he gave a brief, curt order to those nearest—“To the Square.”

They were closing in when instinctively I raised my revolver; but he seized it; and in the struggle the trigger was pulled. The shot was the signal for a fresh attack upon us.

They crushed about us for a moment like bees in a swarm; but in some way Drogoff contrived to hold them in restraint and restore a semblance of order. A circle was closed round us and our guards.

I had held back from the hazardous step of declaring our supposed identity as the “Little Anarchist” and the priest. I was afraid lest in the broad daylight Mirla should be recognized. But I bitterly regretted it now; I had but worsened matters. If we were to be herded in any public place, the chances of her recognition as the Countess would be infinitely greater.

But even at the last moment, just as we were about to be marched off, Fortune’s pendulum swung once more to our side.

Maxim Suvalski came forcing his way through the throng, and with him the man who had played coachman two nights before.

He had seen us in our present dress at the station and recognized us directly.

"What are you doing? Are you mad?" he said to the leader, Drogoff. "Don't you know who these are?"

"They are enemies of the people, brother."

Suvalski was as impetuous as a woman. He dashed to Mirla's side, bared his head, and seizing her hand kissed it before all the crowd. His companion followed his example.

Mirla had kept her nerve splendidly, and saw in a flash both the advantage and the possible danger of the intervention. "Secrecy, brother; secrecy before all things," she said to Suvalski.

"Sister, your will is law to us," he answered; and drawing Drogoff aside he told him that the prisoner was Mirla Gorkov, the "Little Anarchist."

The effect was dramatic. Drogoff turned to the crowd. "There has been a tragic mistake," he cried. "I answer for them on my loyalty to you." Then he shook Mirla's hand. "Cheers," he shouted, "not groans, for the staunchest friend and martyr the people of Russia ever had!" and indicating Mirla, he himself led the cheers.

While the mob were shouting, we were all set free.

Once more we were on the perilous crest of the wave of revolutionist popularity.

Heaven send we were not drowned in the treacherous depths beneath it.

That was my thought. Still we were safe—for the time.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE PENDULUM OF PERIL

THE embarrassments inseparable from the circumstances which had led to our rescue from the mob soon began to crowd upon us.

The local leader, Drogoff, who had out-bluffed me in the revolver game by walking coolly up to its very muzzle, was considerably surprised and not a little suspicious when he heard that I was the priest, Father Tesla, I remembered Viralmi's words as to Tesla being suspect.

"I should never have known you," he said, with a piercing look.

"Does one generally disguise oneself in order to be recognized?"

"I think I can recognize your eyes and nose, but your voice is——" He shook his head.

"Do you think a man should change his garb only?" I asked, imitating the priest's voice as nearly as I could.

He gave a start and his hard rugged features relaxed for a fraction of a second; then with an obnoxiously double meaning he said: "You would make a good spy. You can act what you look."

I fixed him with a keen, searching glance. "I have acted so far well enough to make you, who should know me to be true, think me false; and those who should know me to be false, deem me true. You have done wrong to make me declare myself so openly."

I think this satisfied him. The words showed that I knew the intentions of the leaders toward my assumed self, and that, as the priest, I had done what I had in consequence.

"We may have misjudged you, Father," he said. Then pausing he asked: "But why did you assist the Princess to escape?"

I had already thought how to answer that. I glanced round toward Mirla and drew Dro-goff a step aside. "Do not let the 'Little Anarchist' hear. Would you rather wreck Prince Volonesh's carriage or the whole house and all that is in it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you know who was with her? Count Otto Zuloff. I can force him to us and compel him to give us the bigger prize—but not if you leaders continue to doubt me."

The thought of the coup excited him, as I had calculated it would. "It is the one house, beside the Governor's, which has successfully resisted us. You know of the attempt last night?"

"I have heard that several of our brethren were killed."

"The Prince is the worst enemy and the strongest that we have in all Minsk. He has

long been listed as a tyrant and a traitor to the cause of the people."

"Three trusted resolute men inside the house and a leader who knows the place, and he and his would trouble us no more."

I must have been very much of a rebel at that moment in manner, for he believed me. He gave me his hand. "Do this and you will always have a firm friend in me and others," he declared.

"Had the Princess been injured to-day, all chance would have been lost, for the Prince would have——" as I was finishing the sentence Mirla and Suvalski came close, and it chanced that she was giving an explanation of the same incident.

"I am a woman, brother," she was saying; "and have no heart to witness the frenzied murder of one of my own sex."

"But a Princess, the wife of a man who has connived at the murder of our people," urged Suvalski.

"Let them be seized and tried, not torn to pieces in the streets."

Then I looked significantly at Drogoff and he returned the glance. We understood each other, it was clear.

"Have not you yourself preached death to the persecutors of the people?" said Suvalski.

This was awkward, but Mirla was ingenious. "Have I ever preached that the people shall not show themselves superior in dignity, honour and righteousness, to those who persecute them."

"But there must be bloodshed."

"Alas!" she cried, lifting her hands. "I know it. But if the leaders dare not run risks in keeping it within limits, what of those who follow us? Did not our brother here save us even now from the mob?"

"That is true," they said, more convinced, I think, by the seeming earnestness and indignation with which she had spoken, than by her arguments.

During this short discussion the crowd had gathered round about leaving the five or six of us in a small central ring; and as so many eyes were bent upon us in curious scrutiny, I was nervously anxious to put an end to the scene. I felt somewhat as a bad actor might feel who was trying to play a very difficult and intricate part with failure waiting upon nervousness and death upon failure. I was heartily sick of playing the revolutionary.

"The brother tells me the train will not run until this afternoon," said Mirla to me. "What had we better do?"

"In that case we may continue on our way. Our sister was once befriended by a humble family farther along the road here," I said to the others.

"What is the name?" asked Drogoff.

"The labourer, Dagmar," said Mirla, promptly, coming to my rescue with ready self-possession.

"We have a great gathering in the Market Square," was the reply. "Will you not attend it? Some words from you, no matter

how few, would be more welcome than I can tell you."

"I do not propose to speak in Minsk," answered Mirla. "I have already explained that even my presence here should not be known."

"There is no danger, sister."

Mirla was simply splendid. She lifted her eyes slowly and looked at him as she replied, in the cold, firm tone of absolute authority. "Have you done more for the cause than I, brother, or suffered more? If so, I admit your right to dictate my movements to me. I am going to visit the poor friends of whom I spoke."

Drogoff was silenced. "I spoke without thought of dictation. It must be as you wish, and you only, of course. But our friends here would be glad to speak with you."

"I can see them at the train this afternoon. Will you lead the crowd away or pass us through them? I will go with the Father and my companion only."

"Pass through them with me and I will see that none follow."

I began to breathe freely once more. Mirla's wit and nerve had saved us.

A way was made through the people who cheered us as we passed through them. But just as we reached the outskirts of the crowd, two or three men came running up breathless and excited with the news that a large body of troops were close at hand.

In a second the news spread; and the

scene was one of the wildest excitement, when the soldiers came in sight. Once again we were caught between the upper and nether millstones. Had we gone two minutes earlier we could have secured the protection of the military ; but mixed up with the rabble, just three units of a revolutionary mob, it was a sheer impossibility even to hope that in the fight that was now imminent, we should be treated by the soldiers as other than what we seemed.

The way to the Convent was for the moment completely blocked and we had no alternative but to throw in our lot with the revolutionaries. Messengers were sent hot foot to the Market Square to call some of the crowd there to our assistance. The leaders rushed us through to the other side of the crowd ; and with them we headed the strategical retreat.

It was in truth a ragged rabble of a regiment which we led ; the scum and wastrels of the city side by side with genuine workers ; all animated by a common desire to loot and riot in the name of liberty ; all ripe for any deed of violence which their leaders ordered or their own initiative suggested as likely to harm the class they all joined in detesting.

Surely it was a fearful system of government which could drive men to the bitter lengths these men had gone.

But there was no fighting then, thank heaven. I thought that either the officer in charge of the troops was satisfied at finding



“ It was, in truth, a ragged rabble of a regiment which we led.”

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the crowd run away from him ; or that he did not feel himself strong enough to cope with so big a mob ; but as it turned out I was wrong. The authorities had heard that a huge mass meeting was to be held in the Market Place and had planned a concerted attack there—a movement that was to have very serious results for Mirla and myself.

We tried in vain to break away from the throng, but were carried almost to the Market Place and very close to Tesla's house before a halt was made. We both felt that at any hazard we must get away then.

I declared that Mirla had already run far too great a risk and that she should come to my house and wait until the hour for leaving the city.

"But the meeting is just about to start," pleaded Drogoff.

"I am faint, brother; you forget what I have suffered," declared Mirla.

"Come," I said to her ; and to settle it we moved off.

My intention was to walk away in the direction of Tesla's house, and then make a bolt of it for the Convent : but Suvalski, all unwittingly, prevented that. He insisted upon accompanying us ; and then other leaders came up and in their zeal to see the great "Little Anarchist," and take counsel with her, several of them came as far as the house and some entered with us.

How heartily I cursed this proof of Mirla's popularity as an anarchist ! If she were ever

to reach the Convent every minute was precious ; to say nothing of the risk that Mirla might make some fatal slip.

How I fretted and chafed at the interruption may be imagined. What would happen after the great meeting no one seemed to know.

We had passed a corner of the great Square where the people were gathered : massed in thousands round a number of platforms. Pretty much as you will see in Hyde Park at a big demonstration ; save that these men were in deadly earnest to do and not merely talk or listen to talk, and had the power as well as the intention.

They had already given gruesome proofs of this ; and here they were, pent up in momentary restraint by their leaders, but ready, the instant the signal was given, to slip the leash and pour over the city spreading havoc and destruction, ruin and death in all parts of it.

If that rush were made before we could be well on our way to the Convent, it was good-bye to all chance of reaching that shelter : and this knowledge and the peril of this delay, almost put me out of action through ill temper.

But neither the jeopardy nor suspense seemed to affect Mirla. She played her part magnificently and with wonderful tact, resource and readiness, as if she had been a revolutionary from a child up. Her quiet decisive manner even affected the views of some of the leaders.

The less violence, the more brilliant the success; the greater the restraint now, the safer the government by and by. Feed a beast on blood, and when there is no other, it will suck yours. Teach the people that not attack but defence is true patriotism; and so on. Murder is no policy; but self-defence is honourable. If the authorities strike, hit back—and hit hard with a people's might. That was the line she took; and so impressed were two or three that they rushed away to raise their voices and use their influence to get her counsel adopted.

If they succeeded in preventing any tumult as the result of the meeting, they asked that a meeting of all the local leaders should be called to hear Mirla detail her views; and to this she assented.

An encouraging prospect truly! Still, time at any cost was our object then.

Whether Mirla's revolutionary policy, evolved with such facile promptness at the spur of need, was in itself good or bad, it was destined to have fatal consequences for us; largely due to the muddle-headed, faith-breaking action of the authorities.

It was in this wise. The men who had been with us so far prevailed with their colleagues that an attempt was resolved upon to let the meeting end without violence. Thus, when the troops were poured into the Square with a demand that the meeting be dispersed under penalty of an attack, the leaders gave way; and on obtaining a promise that the people

would be allowed to go to their homes peaceably, they called on them to depart.

The rascallions and roughs murmured ; but the great bulk of those present obeyed, and marched away. The trouble would thus have passed, for the time at least, but for the officer in charge of the troops.

He was that most disastrous combination of fool and martinet—a combination to be found in other armies beside that of Russia. He read the dispersal of the strikers as a proof of cowardice and weakness and, in the belief that he could both punish them for the previous night's work and break up the whole movement, he waited until many had gone and then threw his men into the centre of the Square and opened fire without warning, in flagrant breach of his word. At the same time he made a dash to seize the leaders.

The result was, of course, a temporary success for the troops. The scene was one of indescribable carnage—men and women dropped fast ; the rest fled helter-skelter for cover ; and Mirla's counsel had ended in this reckless butchery.

The moment the sound of firing was heard, the men who yet remained with us rushed away.

"We must take the risk of going," I said, as soon as their backs were turned. Rachel was, however, below stairs, and some delay was caused in making her understand.

It was scarcely more than a couple of minutes ; but it meant everything to us

then. I was in the very act of shutting the door upon us when Mirla who was at the gate uttered a cry of dismay.

The men who had been with us came dashing up the street in full cry for the house—the nearest shelter they had thought of in the emergency—and the soldiers after them.

The latter fired; and the bullets whistled over our heads. One of the leaders was hit just before he reached the gate. He staggered and nearly fell; but his companions picked him up and dragged him into the house, just as some of the troops reached the gate.

A moment later I heard a voice shout—

“A thousand roubles if the house is taken.”

Mirla caught my arm. “You know that voice? Count Otto.”

I ran to one of the windows and saw him. He recognized me and pointed.

“Are you mad?” cried Mirla, pulling me back. Just in time, for the next instant a rifle bullet shattered the pane through which I had been looking.

“They’ve got one fellow who knows how to shoot, anyway,” I said, turning round to her. “But for you——”

But she was as white as the window blind. “Thank Heaven,” she murmured with a smile, and reeled and would have fallen had I not put my arm to support her.

CHAPTER XIX

THE ATTACK ON TESLA'S HOUSE

MIRLA and I were fortunately alone for the moment.

"You'd better make an effort, Mirla," I said. "'The Little Anarchist' mustn't be seen to faint because a pane of glass is broken."

She made the effort. "I'm better now," she answered, adding, with a rueful attempt at a smile, "Oh, Dick, I was thinking of—of—the cost of the glass, you know."

"I know. Glass is beastly dear in Russia, but it can be replaced."

"Not that kind, Dick."

"It's only cousin glass, after all."

"I know; but if the whole pane had gone I should have been so cold and—lonely. Don't let me think of it, please. What are we to do?"

"I think we ought to pray that the place is taken, provided we are not hurt in the business. If the troops get us it will be all right; whereas on the other hand, if they don't, and we can get rid of our awkward friends, we shall be still all right. Here they come," I added, as Drogoff entered with two others.

"There is a window here," he was saying to them; and on seeing me he added some-

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what sharply, "This is no time to stand with idle hands, father. The whole of the lower part of your house must be put in a condition to repel the attack. You must help."

"Of course," I agreed, and set to work with the rest.

"I have sent the girl below to the cellars, out of the way of bullets. This will be no woman's work. You had better join her, sister," he told Mirla.

"When I am hit will be time for that," she replied. "It is not my way to skulk in cellars. I will stay with Father Tesla."

"You had better go," I said, thinking that so she would best escape the chance of recognition.

"No ; not even for you—father."

There was no time to argue. Every man was doing his utmost under Drogoff's direction. They worked as only men accustomed to toiling with their hands can work when they labour not for pay but for their lives.

Every door and window on the lower floors was fastened up and strongly barricaded in an incredibly short time.

Then Drogoff told Mirla that he was confident of success. "Have no fear ; it may be a tussle, but we shall win. I succeeded in getting one of our number away by the back of the house to carry news of our plight."

"Do you expect to beat off an attack of so strong a force of the soldiery ?"

He smiled. He was a born leader of men and a clear-headed clever tactician. "We

shall have to hold the house but for one hour, no longer," he said positively. "I shall strike at the vulnerable spot they have left exposed. Everything is in readiness for an attack upon the barracks and the armoury. To-day, in the anxiety to make a great show in the city, the fool in command has drawn even the ordinary guards away from there. I have ordered the attack to be made within half an hour, therefore, and I know nothing of Colonel Bremski—he is the commanding officer, you know—if he does not rush back with every soldier here, the instant the news reaches him. Meanwhile he will be so confident of taking us here, like rats in a trap, that half the time will be wasted in deciding how to take us."

It appeared that his judgment was sound. The one shot fired at me was followed by some desultory shooting which did no more damage than to break some windows; and when we looked out from the upper windows, we saw the soldiers drawn up in order, staring idly at the house; while a knot of officers a little way down the street, Count Otto among them, were smoking cigarettes and chatting in a quite casual manner.

We heard firing in the distance, and Drogo's face was as hard as a flint at the sound.

"He is a butcher," he said to Mirla. "How would you deal with him? He gave his word that the people in the Square should be allowed to go to their homes in peace, and then—this. It is always so. An

aristocrat's word is always a lie. But he shall pay the price, he and his and all his order, or I am no friend of the people."

"It was infamous!" exclaimed Mirla, quite sincerely.

He was called for then, and Mirla and I went the round of the house. We must know whether any one recognized her, and the best moment to risk this was while they were so intent upon the work in hand. In each room at least one was on watch, revolver in hand, tense with the resolve of desperation. They knew they would have to fight for their lives, and were ready to sell them as dearly as possible.

In the third room we visited—a large one at the front—there were two men, and Drogoff was giving them some orders. One of the two seemed to recognize Mirla. I saw him start and look intently at her with the air of one in doubt. Drogoff and Mirla spoke together, and as he addressed her as "sister" and she agreed with his views, I saw the man pass his hand across his brow in amazement.

So far as I could judge Mirla had not noticed the man, and I went cold with fear for her as I felt that this man knew her and would denounce her.

But she had seen it all—every sign and gesture he made, and she had recognized him also. The instant Drogoff left the room she crossed to the man and held out her hand.

"You are Peter Dagmar, brother. I recog-

nized you, but I was not sure you were one of us."

He doffed his cap at her approach, took her hand shamefacedly, and muttered: "I did not know that——"

"You did not know that it was Mirla Gorkov, the 'Little Anarchist,' you and your wife were treating so well, brother, when I came to your house and you offered to give even your life for me. I have not forgotten that if you have?"

Her cool confidence was superb as she looked at him. I could see that he was deeply agitated. "Mirla Gorkov," he repeated in a husky tone.

His comrade looked up at him. "What's the matter, Peter?"

"Mirla Gorkov," repeated Dagmar in the same strained voice, his frightened eyes on her face.

The other fellow laughed. "Not the cursed aristocrat of the same name, brother. The Countess! Ugh!" and with an oath he spat on the floor. "This is one of us, who has suffered for us, aye, and by God, would die for us too."

"I hope we are all ready to do that for our country," said Mirla, giving the speaker her hand.

I could almost have hugged him for his intervention—only "almost," for he was very unclean and coarse, red-haired and hot. But he made clear for us what Mirla in his presence could not have explained, and had

brought Dagmar back to the possession of his wits.

"Do you think I don't know the difference between a Countess and a comrade, idiot?" he cried, turning angrily on the comrade. Then to Mirla, "It's an honour to see you again, sister; but it's a dangerous spot for all of us just now, and especially for you—a woman."

And so we were out of another tight place, saved this time only by Mirla's own self-confidence, resourcefulness and cool audacity.

Peter Dagmar was a man whom she had assisted for some time; maintaining the whole family when he had been out of work; helping when the wife was ill; and herself nursing and saving the life of the man's favourite child. She had felt sure of him, but her fear was lest in the moment of surprise he might blurt out the fact of her rank.

We were going down the stairs when Drogoff called to me that the troops were going to begin the attack. I glanced at my watch. He had read the Colonel aright. We had been in the house three-quarters of an hour, and even then he contrived to gain yet more time by his cunning.

A loud knocking came at the door; and being careful to keep in cover, Drogoff asked: "What is wanted?"

"The surrender of all in the house."

"Who is speaking?"

"Captain Vriberg, from Colonel Bremski."

"We will surrender."

"Open the door then."

"What terms will you give us?"

Before the answer could be heard one of Drogoff's companions came leaping down the stairs with a great noise and cried in a voice of thunder, "Who talks of surrender?"

"Silence that man," shouted Drogoff at the top of his voice, and for nearly five minutes such a din and hubbub prevailed as if hell had broken loose. Men leapt here and staggered there. They groaned as if hurt, stamped as in desperate struggle, shouted as in rage, until Drogoff fired his revolver in the air. "You all saw that," he thundered. "He attacked me. I only fired in self-defence."

Minutes invaluable to the men in danger had been won by this pantomime of a quarrel.

Then the knocking was repeated.

"Who is there?" asked Drogoff, speaking as if breathless with the fight.

"Captain Vriberg, of course. Open the door."

"We have had a quarrel."

"I heard that, but it's nothing to me. Surrender at once."

"We are divided about it. We are sixty men here, all armed, and half of us hold that we should fight; but they'll surrender on condition." As a matter of fact we were only twelve in number and one was the wounded man, and two were women. But under the circumstances it was perhaps to be reckoned a tactical exaggeration rather than

a lie. "They'll surrender if the Colonel will come and promise that only six of us shall be made prisoners—one in ten."

There was a pause, and then the Captain said, "I'll see the Colonel."

Drogoff turned to Mirla with a grim smile. "Do you know the meaning of that? He knows that the Colonel would give his word for our safety and then shoot us one by one as we crossed the threshold; and he knows, too, that the butcher would reprimand him severely if he did not give him the chance for such a bit of treachery."

"You know him pretty well," I said.

"He is an officer and therefore a brute; an aristocrat and therefore an enemy, a liar, and a traitor to the people." Nothing could exceed the concentrated bitterness with which he spoke.

It was everywhere the one common sentiment.

There was a longer delay than Drogoff had hoped, and it was nearly ten minutes before some one knocked and the Captain said the Colonel was there.

This time another man answered, saying that the leader was with the wounded man, and more precious time was wasted while he was supposed to be fetched. Nor was his ingenuity even then exhausted. His next demand was that the pledge must be in writing, and in the dialogue that followed he quibbled and wrangled first over its terms; then as to the manner in which the six were to

be selected ; and again as to the manner of surrender.

Now, he seemed to be on the point of yielding, and went so far as to pretend to order the removal of the barricade ; the next moment he changed and put another condition ; and so on until the patience of the man outside was exhausted, and with a fierce oath he left ~~and ordered the place to be carried.~~

The attack was no child's play when it did start. A hot fusillade was directed against the door and every window in the house, and under cover of the firing an attempt was made to batter in the front door, while at the same time a ladder was raised against a staircase window at the side.

An equally stout defence was offered. From positions shrewdly chosen and cleverly masked, the men used their revolvers with deadly effect. Three or four soldiers were wounded at the door and the rest made a bolt for cover.

Drogoff, the incarnation of fierce energy and resourcefulness, seemed to be everywhere at once with eyes for everything, wits equal to every emergency and a cool daring that nothing could daunt.

As soon as the attack on the door ceased, he flew to the landing window, reaching it just as the first soldier of several had climbed to the top. Seeing that the other soldiers dared not fire while their comrades were so close, he threw up the window, shot down the first two men, and leaning out, amid a perfect

hail of bullets, he grasped the ladder, and with tremendous strength flung it down with all its human load sideways to the ground.

That was the end of the first effort. The second fared no better, although it was directed simultaneously at the three exposed sides of the house. Again the little man worked like one possessed. Reckless of his life, he darted from spot to spot, wherever the fighting was thickest, and always by his example and daring succeeded in beating off the soldiers. In the lull we were all breathing hard with our exertions, for I had not dared to shirk the fighting. I had taken care not to shoot any of the troops, but there had been one crucial moment in which a great deal had turned upon my action.

A small door at the back had been insecurely barricaded, and, for a few seconds of acute crisis, Drogoff and I were alone there as half a dozen soldiers tried to rush it. It was just give and take as hard as we could while he shouted to the other men to come to us; and if I had not helped him I should have had my brains knocked out.

They were too many for us, of course, and Drogoff had just shot one man and knocked another down when a third made for him with his clubbed rifle. He had inspired me with such admiration for his pluck that with no thought of the consequences to myself, I thrust the butt of my rifle under the soldier's jaw and sent him staggering back against the comrades behind him.

The next moment our men came up and the soldiers were driven off.

"You saved my life, father, and those of every man in it, for the place would have been taken if they'd got in then," he said, gripping my hand during the pause in the fight.

"Rather a good thing you didn't shoot me for a traitor, then," I replied.

"If they all fought as coolly as you, father, a handful of us could hold this house for a month. If we had weapons, that is."

Something in his tone struck me. "What do you mean?"

"This," and he showed his revolver with but one cartridge. "And yours?"

"Empty," I replied.

"So it is with us all."

"Have you no more anywhere?" He shook his head. "What will you do?"

"Die," he replied, in the most matter-of-fact tone. "Each man keeps one for himself at the last. Now, listen, the sister must not be taken, and you can save her. You have had some dealings with these wild beasts—I'm not reproaching you; I shouldn't do that after the way you've fought to-day—but I choose you on that account. Take her down to the girl in the cellar; we'll fasten you in; and you must declare that we made you all prisoners. Make up some tale as to who she is and go through with it. The soldiers will get in next time; we can't stop them; and you must do the rest."

I made an effort not to show the delight with

which I heard this, and replied: "I'd better help you."

"Call her," he answered curtly. "Minutes are scarce"; and when Mirla came he explained his plan, and that further resistance was impossible.

Mirla also made a show of resistance; but he overruled her. "A life like yours is a national trust and must be saved," he declared, and himself led the way downstairs.

Then "Drogoff, Drogoff," came a call from the top of the house. We halted on the stairs. "A messenger has just galloped up to the Colonel, and his news has excited them all."

Drogoff turned with a brief grim smile. "This may not be necessary—if the man comes from the armoury. Wait."

We waited just where we had paused for a few tense moments. Mirla was below me and turned and laid her hand on my arm. She was trembling slightly, and the fleeting glance she cast at me told me how the strain of the suspense was torturing her.

If the troops would make only a show of an attack she would be saved. Every second that passed without a sign from them was like an hour of racking pain, all the more torturing for the stolidity which had to be assumed.

"Drogoff," came the voice again, now unmistakably jubilant. "Drogoff, they're off, The Colonel has given his orders; they're off, at the double too."

Drogoff breathed a sigh of relief. "You will be spared the bit of play-acting as a prisoner after all, sister," he said, with a smile. "Let us go back upstairs."

So intense was our disappointment that neither Mirla nor I could say a word. For the moment we were past the play-acting which he had taken for reality.

It was soon evident that Drogoff's plans had succeeded completely. The attack on the barracks had frightened the authorities, and every lesser consideration was overlooked in the need to beat that off. A handful of soldiers were left by the house as a sort of guard; but these were soon driven off by a quickly gathering mob, who pelted them with stones and then charged with clubs and revolvers.

The barricades in the house were torn down; the door was opened; men rushed in and shook us all by the hand, as though we were a band of gallant heroes; and confusion was general.

I resolved to take advantage of it to slip away quietly in the midst of the hubbub, when Suvalski came dashing up, smiling and flushed with excitement.

"What of the train?" I asked.

"Isn't this a victory? Would that I had been in the house with you all! And I have been of service to you, sister;" and he beamed on Mirla.

"Will the train run?" I asked him again.

"Oh yes."

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"Then let us go to the station at once;" and taking Mirla and beckoning Rachel, I pushed through the excited crowd in the hall to the door. I was determined to start, and take my chance of getting rid of Suvalski in the street.

"Wait, wait," he cried. "You don't ask what I have done. You would be eager if you knew—for he is coming to you here to take you to Vilna."

"Who is coming?" asked Mirla; and I held my breath for the answer.

"Why, your betrothed, sister; and no stauncher friend of the cause can be found in all Russia. I ran on breathless to bring you the news."

"Thank you," said Mirla. Heaven alone knows what that effort at calmness cost her.

I could not even pretend. Discovery was now inevitable.

CHAPTER XX

A TIGER AND HIS PREY

“WERE you hurt in the fight, father?”

It was Suvalski's voice, and I found to my surprise that I was leaning dazed and stupid against the wall. The ill news had knocked me over. “No, I suppose it's only that I have not eaten for some hours, and am not over strong.”

“Is there no food in the house? I'll go and see;” and away he went hustling through the throng of men who were now crowding back out of the house to hurry to the barracks to take part in the fighting there.

“Come, Mirla, we'll make a dash for it,” I whispered.

“Not strong, father. You were no weakling in the fighting.” It was Drogoff, and he took my arm.

“It's only want of food, I think,” I answered, wondering if he suspected us. “But we can't think of that at such a time.”

He laughed. He was in great good humour over the success of his plans. “Did you see him fight, sister? If he could only preach half as well he would rouse the whole Empire

to do justice. How we have wronged you!" he added, turning to me.

What irony it sounded, coming at that moment.

"We are going to the station. The sister here is anxious."

"Have no fear, sister. The train shall not go without you. I'll see to that—and I think you will allow I know how to direct things."

"You are just the man that Russia needs, brother. We shall meet again;" and Mirla held out her hand.

"I will send some one with you who is known," he said. "You must have no more trouble in our streets."

I was on tenter-hooks with every nerve twitching at the delay, and protested that it was not necessary; but he not only insisted, but went on to tell us the plans he had made for that day and the next. "I am using your house as the Committee's headquarters for a few hours, father."

While he was saying this Suvalski returned. "There is nothing in your larder, father."

"We can get something on the way to the station," I returned. "Shall we start, sister?"

"Wait," cried Drogoff, "I will send Dagmar with you;" and he went off to find him.

I signalled to Mirla, and together we turned to go when the red-headed brute, from whom I had torn the bomb the day after my arrival, Peter Basi, approached with a jaunty step to enter the house.

There was still a moment for Mirla to leave.

"Go with Rachel. This man will know me. Quick, for God's sake. Go to Prince Volonesh, and I'll come to you there."

But she would not. Instead, she turned to Rachel. "You go on, Rachel. If you see that we do not get away go to Prince Volonesh's house, see him and tell him where we are."

"Come then," I cried, seeing she would not go alone.

"Father, what are you doing? With Peter Basi on the very doorstep," cried Suvalski, putting his hand on my arm.

He looked at me in resentful amazement as I shook it off angrily; and at that instant Basi came up the steps.

I made way for him. He glanced at me casually, started, and then gave me a keen searching look. His eyes told that he recognized me. He put himself in front of me and blocked the way.

The pause was broken by a laugh from Suvalski. "So intent upon the father that you have no eyes for your own betrothed, brother?"

This ruffian, sensual, vindictive, blood-thirsty and utterly animal, was Mirla's supposed betrothed, then.

He turned and looked at her coldly and searchingly; and then a gleam of infinite malice kindled slowly in his beady eyes. "I am sorry. I did not see you, Mirla;" and he held out his hand. "I was busy identifying the father—his disguise is so good."

Suvalski laughed again at this. I suppose

the situation did seem to him to be vastly humorous.

Repressing all show of repugnance Mirla gave Basi her hand. "I am—glad to see you," she said, in a low unsteady voice.

"I'm afraid this business has upset you, Mirla." He appeared to find special pleasure in using her Christian name, and he mouthed it and repeated it. "Somehow, Mirla, you don't seem very glad to see me. Are *you* not feeling well, Father Tesla?" The beast knew us both, it was clear, and was mocking us—playing with us, his victims, as all the tiger tribe will.

I made no reply. I was trying to fathom his motive. It might be just tiger play; or, on the other hand, it might be that he was acting thus before Suvalski for some secret end. He had pretended to recognize Mirla as his betrothed. He was of the lowest type of creature; and it was just possible that he was making us feel his power that we might buy his silence at a big price. If so, there was still hope; and the strain became a little less acute.

"We are going to the station," I said, after the pause. "Drogoff has gone for some one who is known, to see that we reach there safely. But you can do it now—and we can talk as we go."

He looked at me with a leer of infinite cunning. "It is true we might not all reach the station," he said.

At that moment Drogoff returned saying he

could not find Dagmar, and would therefore go with us himself. "But why not Basi?" he ended, with a significant laugh. "Would not that suit you best, sister?"

"Before we start I want to speak to Mirla and the priest, Drogoff," replied Basi. "Who is in the house? I have some news that may be of great importance. Send for Kolnaki and one or two more. I wish them to hear it;" and he mentioned some other names. "Where shall we go, father? You know your own home best," he sneered.

"Come to my study," I answered, and led the way to the little room at the back where I had had my interview with the real Tesla.

Mirla kept close to me, Basi followed, shut the door behind him, and remained standing by it, his hand on the latch. He was an evil-looking miscreant in all truth; almost the caricature of a man in his repulsive ugliness: the abnormally long nose, the protruding cheek-bones and the heavy-lipped mouth with its yellow fangs of teeth; the huge, ill-shaped ears; all out of proportion to the narrowness of the face, and small, vicious, glittering, close-set eyes.

It seemed the irony of ironies that such a devil as this, misshapen alike in both body and mind, should hold in the hollow of his hand the safety, the very life indeed, of such a woman as Mirla.

But he did, and he knew it as he looked at us both in turn, gloating over our helplessness. I sought to translate the expression of his

hideous face ; but could only speculate whether it was still the tiger business, or whether he was a little uncertain as to the terms he would demand for silence.

On my side I was beginning to think whether even now I could not get us out of the fix by force. He was obviously a muscular man. He was not so tall as myself, but very broad and thickset, with unusually long arms and powerful hands. Of his courage, too, there was no question : a man who had dared to play the chief part in that bomb drama would assuredly have pluck enough. Still I might get him down, and hold him long enough for Mirla to escape ; and I began to work to that end.

His first act was to beckon Mirla. "Come here."

"No," I said, very quietly. "We are alone, and needn't pretend any more."

He turned on me with a snarl. "Do you dare to order me ?"

"Let us understand one another. You know who we are, and you can tell your comrades. They may regard it as a pretty black thing on our part, and may even take our lives. I don't think they will, because at a very critical turn in the struggle just now I helped to drive off the soldiers when they were all but in the house, and I saved Drogoff's life."

"Drogoff isn't everybody," he broke in.

"Let it go at that. You arrived, you recognized us, you pretended you didn't ;

and now you've brought us here to talk. Either you want to gloat over having us in this fix, or else you want to make terms for your silence. Say which it is, and be quick about it."

This imperative line seemed to surprise him considerably. He had apparently expected to find us on our knees to him. "You're the Englishman, Richard Carstairs," he mumbled, putting in an oath before the "Englishman."

I took a step nearer to him. "Look here, if you dare fling your foul oaths at my country I'll drag you down where you stand and choke the life out of you. Say what you've got to say at once. If your silence is for sale, we'll buy it; if it isn't, open that door and call in your friends. There are many worse things than death; and one of them is to be hectored and bullied by a man like you. If there's trouble coming, we'll meet it fighting; but we'd rather get out by paying you."

I should not have spoken so hotly but the sight of the fellow and the glances he kept casting at Mirla made my blood boil. He scowled at me from under his shocky red eyebrows. "Very well, I'll call them," he said, and he turned to open the door.

Mirla made an impulsive step forward and raised her hands. He caught the gesture, and looked round at her, and from her to me. Then slowly turned and faced us again.

"Name them," I said, guessing his thoughts.

"What will you pay?"

"A hundred thousand roubles," cried Mirla impetuously.

This was a mistake, and I glanced at her quickly. "I'm no party to that," I told him. "Let him name his terms himself," I added to her.

"A hundred thousand roubles," he repeated, as if unable to believe what he heard, and his whole face gleamed with avarice. Then after a pause he shook his head. "No, it's not enough."

"How much then?" I asked. "You shall soon have yes or no."

He paused, and fixed his eyes on Mirla with a look that made her wince, and me catch my breath in rage, and then said slowly: "She is known as Mirla Gorkov—my betrothed."

For an instant I could scarcely master my fury sufficiently to utter even a single word. "Well?"

"I can only save her as being that."

Mirla knew now as well as I what was coming, and sank into a chair, covering her face with her hands.

"Go on; you'd better put it a bit plainer than that," I said, almost hoarsely.

"You know what I mean," he replied. "She must be my wife."

I was only stopped from springing straight at his villainous throat by the sudden thought that I might possibly turn this to our advantage. I fought down my impulse, and after a pause managed to say coolly: "No, it is

impossible. Terms are too high. You can have the money, but not this."

"If I have the"—he bent forward and whispered the word as though the very walls should not hear it—"the Countess, I get both."

"Very cunning. But if you hand us over to your friends you'll get neither."

"Then I shall call them. It means your lives, you know."

He was only bluffing, I was sure; but Mirla was deceived. She sprang up. "Wait; this is for me to decide," she said nervously to me. "Basi, if I agree, will you first take Mr. Carstairs to a place of safety, and bring me proof that he is safe?"

"And what of you meanwhile?"

"You can lock me in here and leave your friends to guard me and return with a priest."

He shook his red head over this, chewing the answer as though it held a dozen snares.

"Do you think I'll buy my life on these terms?" I asked Mirla.

"Am I not buying my own? Oh, please, please. It is the only way."

"Very well," I replied, for I saw how I could use the thing to help my plan.

Basi was in desperate perplexity. His ferrety eyes darted all ways at once, as if in search of some safe means to his end.

I began to brace myself for the struggle that was now at hand.

"No, no," I burst out. "You must not do this. You must not;" I cried, and throwing my arms about as if with sudden excitement

I began to walk up and down, gradually shortening the distance between Basi and myself.

Mirla protested, and keeping my back to him I replied with great warmth until, retreating a couple of steps, I turned and sprang upon him.

My attack was so unexpected that my hand was on his throat before he even guessed my intention.

He closed with me, and I soon found I had not underestimated his great strength. His long arms closed round me like a bear's hug, and he made a furious effort to wrestle and throw me.

It was of the essence of the move that there should be as little noise as possible, or we should have the other men in the room to learn the cause. I had him pinned to the wall, and I put forth every ounce of strength in my body and strained every muscle and nerve to keep him still.

"Go, Mirla. Open the door quietly and go out as if nothing had happened. You can get out of the house now For God's sake, go."

But she would not. "Should I leave you here?" she asked.

Basi changed his tactics then. He began to dash his great fists against my ribs with blows of tremendous force and power

"Mirla, Mirla, for God's sake, do as I ask you," I said, knowing I could not stand this punishment long.

"Not for all Russia would I be such a coward," she said.

"Can't you see that you can bring help for me? For God's sake."

She ran to the door at that, and I thought she was going, but she stopped. "You only say that to cheat me to be a coward. I can't go, Dick; I can't do it!"

There was nothing for it, therefore, but for me to try and choke the fellow into unconsciousness. I tightened my grip on his throat and fastened my other hand over his nose and mouth.

He tried to bite and tear at my hand like a savage, and then began to stamp violently on the floor. At that I had to take a chance and throw him. Down we went, making such a noise that I thought the whole house must be roused; and after a minute's rough and tumble on the ground, I got my knee on his stomach and bashed his head a half score of times heavily on the floor.

I was nearly done, but his strength was giving out faster than mine. His struggles became feebler and feebler; his face was growing livid, and a spasmodic gasping and jerking of the throat and chest muscles told me his end was near.

I had to be sure that he wasn't fooling me, however; so I held on until he lay still and unconscious, flaccid as death itself.

I put my hand to his heart, and could just feel a flickering, feeble pulse. Satisfied by

this that he was not shamming, I got off him and stood up.

Mirla was deadly white. "Is he dead?" she asked.

"No. But he's not far from it. Let me get some breath, and we'll go."

I waited as long as I dared, watching him like a lynx for any sign of returning consciousness.

"Now," I said. "A bold front and we shall get through." And with that I opened the door.

Two men I had not seen before were coming down the stairs.

"I want to speak to Peter Basi," said one.

"He's asleep there. I think he's in liquor," I said coolly.

One looked into the room and the other went to the front door.

"He looks like a dead man," said the fellow in the room. "Drogoff, Drogoff," he called; then to me: "You had better wait till he comes round! Hold the door there, Viroff."

"Just as you please," said I easily. "You had better go on, sister."

"No, no. Both wait," he answered. Then he called in a loud voice that rang through the house: "Come, quick, every one; Basi has been strangled;" and at that Drogoff and some others came running down in hot haste.

CHAPTER XXI

THE TRIBUNAL OF LIFE OR DEATH

THE thermometer of hope dropped instantly to many degrees below zero, and while I assumed an air of indifference, I knew that our plight was now all but hopeless.

I had had one momentary impulse to try a bout with the man at the door and get it open that Mirla might leave ; but I choked it back, and thrust my hands in the capacious pockets of my gabardine. My fight with Basi had nearly exhausted me, and the chances of such a struggle would therefore at best have been very doubtful ; while if it went against me, our case would look blacker than ever.

It was best to wait calmly for what was to come.

One man joined his comrade at the door and the rest went into the room where Basi lay, and we heard them pulling him about in their efforts to restore him to consciousness. These lasted so long that I began to think I had killed him.

Brute though he was, I did not want his death on my hands ; and although, if he recovered, his statement would almost certainly cost me my life and might cost Mirla's

also, I was relieved when I heard some spasmodic gaspings and coughings, and judged that he was recovering.

"I think he is better," said Mirla, with a sigh of relief; her thoughts had been running evidently in the same groove.

"Yes, I think so too, thank Heaven." I said no more, not deeming it prudent to speak in the hearing of the two men near.

A minute or two later Drogoff came out of the room.

"What does this mean?" he asked me.

"We fought, and I beat him."

"Why?"

This was the crisis. We had tried hitherto all means except the plain truth, and on the instant I resolved to tell it now—and tell it all. No half measures would help in the face of Basi's knowledge.

"Hasn't he told you?" I asked, after the second's hesitation.

"No. He cannot speak yet."

"He recognized us and took us in there to make terms for his silence. They were so infamous that I refused and fought him, intending to escape from the house."

"Who are you, then?"

"Richard Carstairs, the Englishman, who tore the bomb out of Basi's hand two or three days ago."

"And this?" waving a hand towards Mirla.

"Mirla Gorkov, not the anarchist, but the Countess."

The two men gave a cry of astonishment and then of execration ; but he silenced them with a wave of the hand. His authority was acknowledged. And indeed I had begun to think that that was the one slender reed we had to rely upon. I had saved his life in the fight with the troops, and that ought to count for something.

" You say he proposed terms ? " he said next.

" We offered him a hundred thousand roubles, but he insisted upon having this lady for his wife."

His look was as black as a coal seam at this. " That is the truth ? "

" The truth on the honour of an Englishman. It's too serious a pass for anything but the truth now."

" You have both been taken into our confidence, have learnt our plans, and know our secrets."

" And fought by your side. If I had struck you down instead of that soldier who threatened you, the troops would have got into the house ; all in it would have been captured, and we two should have been safe. Don't forget that. While we were playing the parts, we played straight."

He paused, and with a frown turned away, to re-enter the room at the back. As he was entering he looked back. " You are prisoners, of course. Take them to the small back room at the top of the house and keep guard over them," he told the men by the door.

We all went up in silence to the room he had mentioned, and the two men sat down by the door.

Mirla and I crossed to the window and sat looking out. Drogoff had selected this room with his usual shrewdness. There was no possible escape by the window. It was a sheer drop of some forty or fifty feet from the sill to the flagged pavement of a yard.

"What will they do with us, Dick?" she whispered once.

"I don't know. I hope they won't keep us long in suspense."

"And after all you have done," she sighed.

"I am not without hope, I assure you," I replied.

Had I known all the actual facts, I could not have given her any such assurance. But mercifully I was ignorant of what was going on below, and of the undercurrents of intrigue which were to have so much influence in determining our fate.

We were left thus some two hours when a man came to fetch us. We were taken down to a room on the first floor where the rest were sitting at a table, with Basi, looking very weak and done, on a chair close by.

It was the informal tribunal of the Strikers' Committee, and I saw that Drogoff was at the side of the table instead of presiding. It was the first ominous sign of what was to come.

The president signed to us where to stand. "Stand there. Peter Basi has charged you

with being traitors to the cause of the people ; that you are an Englishman, who has already once prevented him from striking a notable blow on their behalf ; that you have, as a spy, personated the priest, Father Tesla, in order to gain information for our oppressors. And that you, being one of the accursed aristocrats, are also a spy, daring to pass yourself off as one of our dearest leaders, Mirla Gorkov ! What have you to say ? ”

“ What you have said is true except that we are not spies. This personation was first attempted in order to save this lady from a danger of a purely private nature, entirely unconnected with anything to do with the struggle between the people and the government ” ; and then in general terms I described what had occurred at the Villa, and how, when we were attacked on the return, I had brought Mirla into it.

“ When was this ? ”

“ Two nights ago.”

“ But you have continued it,” burst in one of the others.

“ At first the result solely of an accident,” I said ; and I told how Suvalski’s recognition of us at the station, when we were trying to leave the city, and again that morning, when the crowd was threatening us, had led by inevitable steps to the present position. “ All we wished to do was to get away. There is no crime against the people or any one in that. Indeed, as an Englishman, my sympathies are with a people struggling to be free.”

"How can that be when you prevented Peter Basi's work?"

"He was about to hurl the bomb under a carriage in which was this lady?"

"What is the woman to you?" he demanded coarsely.

"She is the promised wife of a kinsman of mine, Sir Andrew Carstairs, and my object in coming to Minsk was to escort her to England."

"When did you arrive here?"

"On the night before I took the bomb from Basi's hands. I went to the *Kaiserhof Hotel*."

"You didn't stay there?"

"No. Prince Volonesh, this lady's guardian, said I should be in some danger at the hotel, and took me to stay in his house."

"Why did you leave it?"

"On account of a quarrel with him."

"You are described to us as a secret police agent from Petersburg."

"That description can only have been given by some one speaking in ignorance, or else by a deliberate liar. My identity can easily be established by an appeal to the British Consul, if there is one here. I have told you the truth. I have nothing now to conceal; and am not such a fool as to lie to men in such serious earnest as you, and at a critical juncture like this."

"Any one can talk. He is a spy," growled one of them.

"If I were a spy should I have fought the soldiers as I did? It chanced that at one

moment of that fight a single blow from me would have changed everything. Drogoff here and I were fighting together at the little back door when it had been beaten in, and a soldier was in the very act of clubbing him with his musket when I struck the man down. Had I struck Drogoff instead, he will tell you nothing could have prevented the soldiers from getting the upper hand. Ask him ? ”

“ It is true, absolutely. He fought as well as the best of us. But for him, we should all be prisoners now, or dead men.”

“ Was that the act of a spy ? ” I asked.

“ Why did you do it ? ”

“ Because I am an Englishman, and it was the only fair thing to do.”

A long pause in the proceedings came, and the men at the table put their heads together and gabbled quickly in low tones and with much gesticulation.

Presently the president said, “ You have made a charge against Basi here.”

“ He knows what passed in that room. Let him tell it.”

“ He denies what you said to Drogoff.”

“ Can I put a question to him ? ”

“ If he is not too weak from your murderous attack to reply.”

The second ominous indication this of the sympathies of the “ Court.”

“ Why did you take us to that room, Basi ? ”

“ I wished to speak to——” he broke off short, seeing a trap in the question, and fell

back in his chair, muttering, "I can't speak."

"You could speak freely enough before, Basi," said Drogoff. "You must answer that question."

"Are you master here with your 'musts?'" cried a man sitting next the president.

As I had feared, there was a split in the camp. Basi had, in our hearing, given the names of the men he wished to be sent for; and in this way had packed the "Court."

"Basi is too much injured to answer any questions," decided the president. "Injured by you."

"It was a fair fight. But he did take us into that room as you know. Ask yourselves why he did it; and why for some minutes—Drogoff, you remember this—he kept up the pretence that I was Father Tesla, and this lady the Mirla Gorkov he was to marry? Does not a man know the features of the woman he is pledged to marry?"

I got home with that, and I could see one or two of them saw the inference suggested by Basi's act.

"If he thought the lady was your Mirla Gorkov why did he want me to make a third at the interview? There is no answer to that. But I can offer you an explanation. He recognized us both as we stood at the door. It was as Mirla Gorkov, the Countess, and Richard Carstairs, the Englishman, he wished to see us together privately in order that he might name his terms for keeping it silent."

"It is a lie!" cried Basi fiercely.

"He has found his voice then. Let him answer my questions."

But his friend, the president, came to his rescue. "You tried to bribe him, we know. We have heard enough from you," he said brutally. "What says the woman?"

"I have little to say," declared Mirla, "except that I am more responsible than Mr. Carstairs. He has done all this solely for my sake, and I ought to bear the blame alone."

"You admit you are the so-called Countess Gorkov?"

"Oh, yes. There are many among your comrades who know me, and know what I have done to help them in times of distress."

"We're not here to listen to that. Why did you turn spy?"

"I am no spy. You have heard the whole reason for my personating your leader."

"You hear?" he said to the men about him.

"Wait," said Mirla, with that attention-compelling manner she had at times, "I offered that man a hundred thousand roubles to let us go."

"And he refused it," burst out the president angrily. "Do you think the people are dogs to be bought and sold with your roubles?"

"He did not refuse it. He said that if I would be his wife he would let Mr. Carstairs go free, declaring that then he would have

both me and the money. Wait," she cried again, as the man was about to interrupt. "I will keep that condition now. Let Mr. Carstairs leave the city, and I will pledge my word that the man shall have me for his wife, if he wishes, and my wealth for your cause."

Even the brute who presided was moved by this declaration.

A hot protest sprang to my lips ; but Mirla anticipated me, and, turning quickly, laid her hand on my arm with an imploring, " Please ! "

Then there was dead silence in the room for some moments.

CHAPTER XXII

BUT ONE PUNISHMENT FOR A SPY—DEATH

NOT for an instant did I think of allowing my freedom to be bought on the terms Mirla had so sincerely and wholeheartedly offered. But I felt that I could make known my intention later when we saw its effect upon the "Court."

The president turned first to Basi and spoke with him in low tones, and then all the men put their heads together and another animated consultation followed.

"You can't do this, Mirla," I said, while they were talking.

"It is for these men to settle."

"They take me for a pretty low-down hound, if they think I'll agree. Why if it was my life I wouldn't do it."

"It is your life *and* mine. I know these men."

"Silence, you," cried the president. Then to Mirla, "What is the amount of your fortune?"

"Wait a moment, I have something to say here," I declared. The fellow put up his hand and ordered me to be silent. "No, I'm going to say this. I won't take my liberty on those terms. If you were to do this vile thing,

I'd wait here until a chance came to finish what I began to-day with that red devil there. It was this infernal proposition that sent my hand to his throat. That he consents to it now shows that he proposed it before."

Drogoff had been sitting with his face buried in his hands, but at this he lifted his head and looked at me.

"The Englishman is right," he said. "The thing is infamous."

"Dictating again, are you? Who made you master?" cried a man opposite to him.

"Order, here, order," said the president. "Drogoff can give his opinion—even if it's wrong."

"I have a last thing to say, an offer to make. A hundred thousand roubles were offered before. I am rich enough to add a like sum. Let us both go and that sum shall be paid."

"Do you dare to bribe us?" thundered the president.

"No. I propose merely a ransom. You can use the money for purposes of your cause. One thing more. I am no Russian, but a British subject, and you will make a big blunder if you think you can treat me with impunity, or help your cause by starting a quarrel on this account with the English Government."

Again they laid their heads together, Drogoff taking a prominent part this time, protesting eagerly and vehemently, it seemed to me, judging by his gestures.

"You say you will pay a ransom of a hundred thousand roubles if we let you go?"

"No. Two hundred thousand for the two of us. For myself alone, nothing. We both go or—you do what you will."

Once more an animated conference was held; and then Drogoff threw himself back in his chair and clasped his hand over his eyes.

I read the meaning of this and glanced at Mirla. She lifted her brows slightly with a faint smile. She had read it also.

There was an interval of dead silence, broken only by the rustling of some papers which the president turned over. I scanned the faces of the men. With the exception of Drogoff and his immediate neighbour, every one was staring straight in front of him with set, iron-hard, implacable expression.

Then the president looked across at us. Mirla drew a little nearer to me—near enough to touch me—while she nerved herself to hear the decision.

"We are agreed"—Drogoff took his hand from his eyes and bent forward; but the speaker raised a hand—"except two of us, that you are both spies, and for a spy there is only one punishment, all the world over" He paused. "That—is death."

I saw Mirla bite her lip and move her arm against mine, as her muscles stiffened at the last word; but no other sign of emotion escaped her. Her pluck was wonderful; and no less wonderful her self-command.

A long silence followed the delivery of the

decision, and I was conscious of a singular division of thought—almost as if the lobes of my brain were working independently.

With the one I was seeking for even a possible chance of getting Mirla out of the desperate pass to which I had brought her ; the other was occupied with trifles, a lot of petty insignificant details of the men at the table. The length of the president's nails and the dirt on them ; the lack of a finger on the right hand of the man next him ; the light hair of a third plastered down in streaks with pomade ; the black mole on another face ; the cluster of hairy warts on the back of Drogoff's left hand ; the shape of some grease marks on the table-cloth ; and so on.

The silence was broken by the president ; and his voice startled me, as though I had been suddenly roused from a dream.

" You have nothing to say, then ? " he asked.

" Of what use is it to speak, if you have resolved to murder us ? "

" We do no more than justice."

" Is there no one to whom we can appeal from this—justice ? " He made no answer.

" Drogoff, I fought by your side and saved your life ; do you tell me there is no appeal from these butchers ? "

He stirred slightly at the words, but said nothing ; and the president waved his hand to the men at the door to lead us away.

Although I had taken the decision so quietly I was quite resolved to make a last

fight for liberty, and at that instant a plan occurred to me—a sort of desperate forlorn hope, the best chance of which would be its surprise.

It was possible that no one would be below stairs—the “Court” had been held in the front room on the first floor ; and not probable that there would be more than one man or, at most, two. If I could but get hold of a weapon, surprise would probably enable me to overpower the two who were acting as our warders ; and then our way would be fairly clear. They didn’t look to be worth much in a scrimmage. One was so much smaller than myself that I knew I could lift him off his feet and fling him anywhere ; and the other was puffy with the fat of idleness and drink.

In taking us up the narrow stairs to the room above and bringing us down again we had walked in single file—one of the men in front of Mirla ; the other, the little fellow, behind me ; and I judged they would do the same now. My intention was to wait until Mirla was out of the room and I was passing out, then snatch the small man’s revolver from him, throw him back into the room ; and then, if need compelled, to shoot down his companion.

All this passed in a flash through my mind, and to gain time so as to give Mirla a hint, I said to the president : “ Are we to be allowed to communicate with our friends ? ”

It was a mistake on my part. There must have been some change in my tone of which

I was not conscious ; for I noticed two or three of the men look up sharply ; and I saw Peter Basi's lop-eared, evil face bent forward.

"No," said the president curtly.

"But my friends in England must know of my death."

"You are no Englishman, but a police spy."

At that, Drogoff sprang to his feet. "I protest against this. He is an Englishman, and we dare not do a thing like this. It is the act of savages."

A noisy hubbub followed, in which all at the table joined, speaking all together in loud vehement tones, gesticulating and oathing in great confusion.

I changed my plan on the spur of the moment. I would make my dash on the men at the door at once ; and I whispered to Mirla what I wished her to do.

But I had reckoned without that red devil, Basi. Just as I whispered to her I saw him pluck the sleeve of the man nearest him, and I was backing a step or two in readiness for my effort, when the man by Basi and another left the table and ran to the door.

I had played the fool with my chance, and Basi's cunning had beaten me. He leered at me from his safe distance ; and it was all I could do, in my mortified disappointment to assume an expression of indifference and curiosity at the action of the two who now stood at the door. To attack four men, all armed, would have been the venture of a maniac.

To cover my defeat I took pencil and paper from my pocket, and, stepping back to the table, I wrote down my name and address and my cousin's name, and handed the paper to Drogoff.

"You can send the news of my death there," I said.

Then there came a lull in the wrangling, and the president again ordered us to be led away.

My scheme of escape was not only wrecked ; but the ultimate chances worsened. The four men went with us up the stairs, and three of them remained in the room now, instead of two.

"If he attempts to come near you, shoot him," said the fourth.

"Can I not write to my friends to let them know ?" asked Mirla.

"Oh, they'll know soon enough," he answered with a coarse laugh ; and with that he went away.

Mirla and I sat down again in the chairs by the window where we had sat before the "trial." We did not speak. I could not. Any mere words seemed so empty then, so useless, so mocking.

The men talked to one another. They spoke chiefly of the fighting in the city ; of the things they had done and seen and hoped to do ; and now and again laughed at some story of ruffianism, destruction or looting.

Then they grew weary of the watch and began to yawn. One said they were missing

a fine time in the city, and cursed us as the cause. Another asked what the delay meant, and what the men downstairs were doing, and what the devil there could be so much to argue about.

Another, with what he held to be humour, began to jest about the death in store for us. Whether we should be shot or knifed or strangled. He thought Mirla should be strangled—that was the death for an aristocrat—but even his companions were disgusted at this, and gruffly bade him hold his tongue.

Mirla bore it all without flinching in the least or giving the slightest sign that she had even heard the brute. Indeed, in the midst of the brute's ribaldry she asked me the time in a most casual tone.

We had been thus about an hour when the president and Drogoff entered.

Mirla would not even look round.

The president sent the three men out of the room and addressed me—"We have decided everything. Drogoff will tell you"; and then went out.

Drogoff came up and held out his hand. "Will you believe I have done my best for you?"

"Yes," I said, clasping his hand; "I am sure of it. The result? Are we to die?" He winced, and with a sigh threw up his hands.

"When?"

"In an hour from now. But you can leave letters which shall be forwarded to your friends."

All the time Mirla did not make a sign, save that I heard once a catch of the breath as she sat staring steadily out of the window.

"Is that all?" I asked, after a silence.

"Not quite," he answered. He paused, and then laid some writing-paper on the little rickety table near to him, and a revolver on top of it.

"Does that mean a fighting chance?" I asked eagerly.

He shook his head. "No, no; the men are posted outside your door. Three of them. But—you may not care to be alive when they come for you. It was all I could do." He paused again, and his hard face showed more feeling than I should have deemed possible. "You are a brave man, Mr. Carstairs—and, on my soul, you shall not die unavenged. This deed is a shame and a foulness to our cause; but it is Basi's work and those with him. Good-bye."

Again he held out his hand and I shook it.

"Countess, I should like you to know this is none of my work," he said.

There was a pause. Then Mirla rose and offered him her hand. "I know that, and thank you." Not a tremor in the voice, nor a quiver of the lip.

He held her hand a moment; then, dropping it, he turned away with a gesture of intense regret and despair, and left us alone in the room together with just one hour between us and death.

CHAPTER XXIII

DEATH'S CONFESSIONAL

ONE hour to live—or less.

Less if we took Drogoff's hint. "You may prefer not to be alive when they come for you." I was to use the revolver to slay the woman I loved, and then blow out my brains.

I picked up the revolver, half mechanically, and examined it.

Three chambers were loaded. A bullet for each of us, with an extra cartridge in case one of the shots missed.

I shuddered, and was laying it down when Mirra's eyes and mine met. She was marvellous in her steady courage.

"It was not an unkindly act," she said.

"Don't," I cried, drawing my hand away from the weapon, as though its very touch were deadly.

"Ah, I forgot. I am a Russian, and look at this as he did. We Russians are so much nearer to barbarism than you in the West. Couldn't you do it?" and she glanced at the revolver.

"No, no; a thousand times no."

She smiled at my vehemence. "Why not? But wait. Before you answer let us write what there is to write. See, they have

given us but one pencil." She spoke quite lightly, and even smiled. "When we have done, we will talk. Is it not strange? We have been so much together and yet know so little of one another."

Without a trace of fear or even discomposure, she drew her chair to the table and began to write. Such perfect calmness seemed almost unnatural; and as I paced up and down the small room I glanced now and then at her in mingled amazement and admiration.

She caught my eyes upon her once and read my thoughts. "You are surprised that I am not hysterical as women often are. You do not understand. But you shall, before—before that"; and she touched the revolver with her pencil. "I am not afraid to die. It is not the fact of death that appals one, it is the manner of it. I can even smile at it."

"Your courage is marvellous," I said.

"Courage? You think it courage? I suppose that is what it seems to you; but——" She dropped her gaze, sighed and shook her head, looked up again, and this time smiled; then resumed her writing.

I could not take the same calm view of our fate. Life ran strong in my veins; I was not afraid to die, but I wanted to live, and rebelled passionately against this fate. I could not look death in the face with the same cold equanimity as Mirla.

My instincts were all to fight against it; and while she sat writing so steadily and calmly,

my thoughts were intent upon finding some means of making a last fight.

Again she read my thoughts, although I had not known that she was even observing me.

"It is wasted time to think of resistance, now," she said quietly, as she folded the letter she had written. "And minutes are too precious now to waste."

"You have guessed my thought again."

"I have been watching your face."

"I can use the revolver there to make a last effort."

"And what good will you do? We are at the top of the house; many of the strikers are downstairs; you might kill one or two; but how will that save either you or me? You will but have their blood on your hands. No, no. Write what you have to write, and—I want to tell you something."

I sat down and wrote to my cousin that I had been mistaken by the strikers for a police spy, and was to be shot in an hour.

"To whom have you written?" she asked, as I finished.

I told her. "I doubt if it ever reaches him," I added.

"Will he grieve much?" The question surprised me and she saw it. "You are surprised that I can ask that. But"—she paused—"there is no need now for any concealment between us. I never cared for him. I suppose I did very wrong in ever promising to be his wife—but I should have kept my

promise had he wished it. Don't think I should not. With me my word is as binding as the most sacred oath. Yes, I should have married him had he wished it."

"Why did you promise?"

"The Princess knew. Women know women, Dick. I promised because I knew of the project to force Count Otto upon me, and because I was eager—no, eager is not strong enough—I was hungry and thirsty, starving to see the world outside my own country. I thought all Englishmen were——" She paused a long time and added with a smile—"I can't say it yet."

"Andrew is a good-hearted fellow, Mirla."

"I know—indeed, I had read him pretty well before we parted at Carlsbad, and since then in his letters, few as they have been. It would have been a sad mistake, Dick, that marriage. I am wild-spirited, wayward, impulsive, hot to do the thing which my heart prompts and to do it instantly, and my soul chafes at restraint and rebels against it—a Little Anarchist in fact. But I have a loathing for the groovy existence of a housewife. And he would look for just that, nothing more. His ideal is—propriety. I could not live without love, and he would give me two frigid fingers to shake. It would kill me. Now you see that what you think is courage is merely resignation tempered by gratitude."

"Yet you offered to be the wife of that brute beast, Basi?"

"Have I not brought this upon you? It was but little that I offered. There is always a way out"; and she laid her fingers upon the revolver.

"You offered your life for me?" I said unsteadily.

"Would God they had accepted it!" she cried with emotion; then with a change to her first calm tone—"But tell me of yourself. Something that shows me yourself—your inner self. You have some woman you love in England. Tell me of her."

"You saw just now my only letter was to my cousin."

"True. I did not think of that," she said, her eyes on the table where her fingers were playing nervously with a sheet of paper. "Tell me of your life then. Where you have travelled; what you have done and seen. Tell me, tell me"; and she tapped her foot insistently.

"Chiefly a sort of roaming wanderer's life, mine," I answered, and went on to speak of travels and cities and people.

"We are alike in that then—you would beat out your wings against the bars of a cage."

"We are alike in other ways than that, Mirla." I meant more than the actual words I used, and she half guessed my real meaning.

She lifted her head and let her eyes rest full on mine. "I wonder if we are in one way, Dick?" she said very earnestly.

My heart was beating so fast at that last

question and at her look, that I could hear in it the silence which fell between us. Did she mean what I had seemed to read in her eyes? Had she guessed the secret I had tried so hard to keep from her? She was no less agitated now than I. She had faced the certainty of death without the quiver of a muscle; but she was now trembling and timorous, and her bosom rose and fell quickly.

We were to die within a few minutes; was there shame or wrong to any one that all should be made plain between us? I loved her, Heaven knows, with all the love in my heart. I had wrestled with it and fought it down, out of loyalty to the man to whom she was pledged, so long as there was any hope of our getting away. But now that that hope was gone, was there any disloyalty in letting the truth be known?

If she loved me, I might be able to help her in these last moments of our grim death comradeship. If she loved me—the very thought filled me with the desire, sweeping, spurring, irresistible, to take her in my arms and feel her kisses on my lips.

“Mirla!” I whispered, but she seemed not to hear. She made no sign in response.

I half drew back the hand I had stretched out to take hers. If I were wrong, an avowal from me at such a crisis would but embitter the last few moments of her life. Doubt chilled me, and I rose to fight back the mad impulse that had seized me.

At the noise I made she turned and rose



“ ‘ Mirla, Mirla! Can you think what you ask.’ ”

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also. She was very pale now, but her eyes were glowing.

"Dick, I am going to ask you something. Don't turn away. I want you to let me put my hands in yours, and to look in your eyes while I ask it."

"Mirla!" I held out my hands, and she put hers into them.

"You see I am trembling now," she said wistfully. "Even my lips. I want you to—to help me—to die."

"What do you mean, Mirla?" My voice was hoarse and all unsteady.

"I think I—I am turning coward," she said with a pathetic smile. "You will help me?"

"I cannot see a coward in you."

"Yes, yes. I am afraid of death, but I could meet it with a smile if—if——"

"Mirla!"

She drew one of her hands from mine, touched the revolver, and then instantly seized my hand again. "Do, Dick. Death would be so easy—so welcome, indeed."

I closed my eyes with the ache of sorrow for her, and the fearsomeness of the thing she would have me do.

"Mirla, Mirla! Can you think what you ask."

"Do, Dick. For God's sake, I implore you. Let my last look on earth be on you."

It was more than I could endure without baring my heart to her. I drew her closer to me. "You ask me to do this; I who love you?"

"Ah, my dear one, this has made even death welcome," she cried, as her arms came round my neck and our lips met in the exquisite ecstasy of love's first kiss. Then with a sigh and a smile she let her head sink on my shoulder.

As we stood thus almost in silence, the minutes passed uncounted and unheeded; all the world and all that was of it forgotten, even the impending sword whose thread was all but severed.

Twice she lifted her face from my shoulder and glanced up at me, urging me with a smile to tell her again that I loved her; and answered me sweetly protest for protest.

We were roused from our dream at length. There was a call in the house, and one of the men outside ran noisily down.

Mirla raised her head and listened. "It is nearly time, Dick."

I looked at my watch.

"There are still five minutes," I said, in a low tone, and with a deep sigh.

"For whom that deep, deep sigh?"

Her face was upraised to mine, and I bent and kissed her.

"It is hard to die just when we have found our love," I murmured.

"Hard to die? No, no. Not hard. What but this death could have unsealed our love one for the other? No, Dick, not hard. Death has given us that sweet welcome blessing. But for death I should have been another man's wife, Dick, and you——" she

stopped, and gazed with a wistful loving smile into my eyes.

"No other woman's lips would ever have touched mine, Mirla."

"That does not mean happiness, dearest. What would life have been to us apart? I am content. I would rather die with you than live without you. That I swear. Death comes to me as a friend with comfort."

"How you love me, dearest!" I whispered; and again our lips met.

There was another movement then outside the door, and the murmur of the men's voices reached us indistinctly.

Mirla raised her head.

"The time has come, Dick."

Without a tremor she picked up the revolver and held it to me.

"Mirla!"

"Let me look into your eyes as you do it, Dick. See, I am as calm as if it were a kiss from your dear lips—nay, infinitely calmer."

"My God, I cannot, I cannot," I cried passionately.

"Dick, you must. You will make death so easy."

"No, no. I cannot."

"Yes, you must."

I turned away, my thoughts a very maelstrom of emotions. I could not do it. The thought was too horrible to be endured.

"I would kill myself for you, but this—I cannot."

"Do you see how unkind that is? The

men who are coming will have no—no such thought—no hesitation. They will make death not only cruel but terrible. You rob it of all its terrors and make it sweet, Dick!”

Moved by her pleading I took the revolver in hand, and she thanked me with a smile. “Dear one,” she murmured. “Let me be in your arms. Thank God.”

I tried to lift the revolver, but my arm refused. “I cannot, Mirla, I cannot. Even now there may be some way of escape. These wretches may relent.”

“Ah, Dick, how forgetful! If we were to live it would only be for misery. Only death can unite us.”

Once more there was a commotion outside the room. This time several voices called from below, and our guards answered, and again we heard the tread of rapid feet on the stairway.

“They are coming now,” said Mirla. “Quick, dearest, quick. Think what they may do to me—worse than death. Be merciful and save me from them! For the love of God.”

Sick and cold with the horror of the deed she so passionately urged me to commit, yet wrought up by the terrible suggestion behind her words, I nerved myself with a last strenuous effort, and raised the pistol halfway.

“Thank Heaven and you, dearest, for this blessedness,” she murmured, her lips smiling, her face radiant, and her eyes alight with love, as she awaited the shot.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE PENDULUM AGAIN

THE torture of those few seconds when Mirla stood waiting with her superb courage for me to kill her, was indescribable. I trembled so violently that even had I been able to overcome my loathing and repugnance of the act, I could not have steadied my hand sufficiently to do what she asked.

My hand fell to my side, and I groaned in sheer anguish.

"I cannot, Mirla, I cannot."

"You are cruel," she murmured.

The commotion in the house was renewed, and we both stood listening.

Heavy steps sounded on the stairs—the steps of several men in haste.

"Give me the revolver," said Mirla.

Instinctively I drew back, holding it away from her outstretched hand.

The steps reached the landing, paused, and then passed on into some room at the front.

While I listened, wondering what this could mean, Mirla took the weapon from me.

"No, no, no, Mirla, for God's sake, no," I cried.

"Better this a thousand times than to fall

into their hands. Kiss me once again, Dick, the last kiss, dearest."

I seized her passionately and strained her close to my heart.

Even as I held her thus, she disengaged her hand and raised the weapon toward her head.

"Let it be so, dearest," she murmured.

"No, you must not, you must not. Keep the revolver to the last," I cried, catching her wrist.

"But you?"

"They can do no more than kill me. Do as I ask? Something may even yet save us."

"No, this is the only way—for your sake," and with a quick gesture she endeavoured to level it at her head.

But I seized her hand and stayed her.

"You would rob me of the certainty of happiness for the poor chance of misery," she cried, fixing her eyes on me with a look of loving reproach.

As she spoke we both started at the sound of musketry firing in the streets. Some desultory shots replied, and from their nearness I judged they were from the front room next to us.

"The troops, Mirla. They have come to renew the attack on the house," I cried joyously. "By Heaven, was I not right? We may yet get safe and sound out of——" I stopped short as I met her glance.

She was pale with the pallor of death; all her joyous, confident courage was gone,

and in its place the dulled set look of misery. Her eyes were wide with emotion.

"You had better barricade the door," she said, her voice husky and utterly unlike any tone I had ever heard from her.

"What is it, Mirla?" I asked, approaching her, for in my excitement I had run to the window to try and get a glimpse of what was passing.

"The door, the door," she murmured, pointing to it with her left hand, as she edged away from me. "Barricade it."

The strangeness of the gesture struck me. Her right arm was held down tight to her side, the hand being hidden in a fold of her skirt. A glance at the table and her meaning was plain.

"Give me that revolver, Mirla."

"No, no. You told me to keep it in case of need." She did not look at me while she spoke, and when I stepped toward her she backed away, and kept the little ramshackle table between us.

The noise of conflict was in all the house now; the crash and splintering of wood, the smashing of glass, the shouts and cries of men filled in the silence between us two.

"Mirla!" She made no reply, nor would she look up. "Mirla! Why won't you look at me?"

"The door," she repeated. "If these men are beaten by the soldiers, they will still come for you."

"For *me*? For me—only, Mirla?"

"For—us, I mean," she answered unsteadily.

"I know what you really mean—to get me to turn my back. Whether they come or not is nothing to me compared with that"; and I pointed to the hand in which she held the weapon.

She lifted her head and looked across the table at me as she said very deliberately and firmly : "I will not live for—misery."

I saw then what my selfishness had hidden from me. If we escaped, it would be but to be parted after our love had been told. All the hopeless misery before us both if we escaped crossed my mind like a blinding darkness. Yet I could not suffer this horror to be done.

"You shall not do it, Mirla. On my oath you shall not," I declared vehemently.

"My life is my own to do with as I will," she answered. "If you love me you dare not stop me."

I watched her every gesture and movement. Despite the little table between us, I was near enough to prevent any attempt she might make. She saw this and began to back away slowly, keeping her eyes rivetted upon me.

Then a last plea flashed upon me.

"Hear me one moment, and then I will not stop you."

She came close to the table again. "It is the only way, Dick," she said looking utterly forlorn and wretched.

"Do you see how this will touch me? If the strikers win now, it can make no

difference to wait. But if the soldiers win and find me here—alone—they will hold me guilty of—your murder.”

Care for me conquered. With a low cry of agony she laid the revolver on the table and fell into a chair.

I breathed a sigh of intense relief. For the present she was safe ; and I could leave the future to look after itself.

The clamour and din in the house were growing every minute now, and I began to hope that this time the troops were gaining the upper hand.

I would have given a thousand pounds to know how the fight was really going. The suspense was torture.

The shouting below grew louder and nearer, and then came a rush of steps up the staircase.

I ran to the door to adopt Mirla's suggestion—to make a barricade of such furniture as there was in the room. But I was too late.

As I laid my hands on a heavy chest to drag it across the floor, the key was turned.

I sprang back to Mirla's side and seized the revolver as the door was thrust open quickly and Basi and a couple of his friends entered. Basi's evil, lop-eared face was all dirt begrimed and blood-stained ; all three bore signs of having passed through a desperate struggle ; and all had the hunted look of men in the last extremity of desperation and passion.

Each man was carrying a revolver, and I knew the object with which they had come. It was written on their faces.

But I knew enough of Basi to feel sure that, tiger-like, he would still want to play with his victims before killing. I reckoned on this. He was dead confident, having two others to back him, all armed as he was, against me unarmed, as he supposed. So I stood back against Mirla, carefully hiding my weapon from them.

"This is the spy who has brought the soldiers back, thinking to save his lying skin. But you won't. Your friends are in the house. Hear them?"

He paused with a sneer: and the noise came streaming up from below and in at the open door.

"You've beaten us so far, you lying devil of an Englishman. But they won't save you. Don't think it," he cried with a brutal laugh. "Neither you nor the cursed aristocrat there—the Countess! We'll see to that—for both of you. We can finish with you, and still escape by the roof." He larded his speech with offensive oaths and epithets, all uttered with the spasmodic vehemence of uncontrollable rage.

I was thinking of nothing but just how to deal with them. He soon saved me the trouble of any such thought. "What are you going to do?" I asked steadily.

"Do? Do?" It was almost a scream. "Do? Curse you, you tried to take my life, and now——"

My cue came then. With a bitter oath of rage he dashed forward, fired almost at

random, and then tried to strike me in the face with his weapon.

It was a very fortunate blunder for me. I caught his right wrist with my left hand and twisted it, while I struck him with my own weapon a smashing blow on the head. One of the others fired at me at that moment, but the bullet missed me. Then I picked up Basi, who was nearly unconscious from my blow, and flung him straight at the other two as they were rushing forward to assist him.

Before they could shake off their surprise at this unexpected turn of things, I had them both covered with my revolver.

"Don't you dare to move," I said quite coolly. "It will mean death."

All their truculent bravado fled as they looked down the barrel that threatened them at such close quarters.

I held them thus some thirty seconds.

"I don't want your lives, you two, though you came to take mine. Drop your revolvers on the floor and you may save yourselves for all I care, if you can." They hesitated. "Drop them," I thundered with an oath. "Do what I say, or I fire."

They threw them down then, and the next moment they turned and fled out of the room, with as much thought for Basi as he, in his unconsciousness, could have had for them.

"We're getting quite an armoury," I said, as I picked the three revolvers up and laid them with mine on the table.

Next I finished my barricade of the door,

locking it on my side, and piling most of the things in the room against it. It was quite possible that Basi had lied in saying the soldiers were getting the best of the fight in the house ; while even if they were, I wanted no more visits from any flying strikers.

Then I bent over him. It was a vicious blow I had struck him, and the blood was oozing from it and staining his face in streaks. He was a loathsome object at any time, and now doubly repulsive. He had done his utmost to take my life, and if I had killed him, it would have been no more than he deserved. But I couldn't let him lie there and die like that ; so I staunched the blood, bound up the wound as best I could, and laid him down in a corner of the room.

I had scarcely finished when rousing cries came echoing through the house ; more men came rushing up the stairs and past the door of the room ; the handle was then tried, and some one thundered on the panels with the butt end of a rifle.

" Is any one here ? "

" Yes," I called. " Who are you ? "

" Open the door at once."

" Not till I know who you are. And we're pretty well armed."

" Open, I say, in the name of the Czar, or we shall batter in the door."

" Are you soldiers ? " I called.

" Of course we are, fool," came the reply.

" It's more to the point who *you* are."

" Wait a minute," I called, and dragged

away my barricade sufficiently to allow the door to open wide enough to let one man in at a time. Then I stepped back to my "armoury."

"Why the fool's got all his furniture piled here," said a man's voice; and the next instant I caught sight of part of a uniform as a man thrust in his arm to push some of the obstacles away.

"The fool's very glad to see *you* anyhow," said I. "I'll clear the way for you"; and I pulled the things back.

Half a dozen soldiers crushed into the room.

"You're our prisoners," said one, a sergeant.

"That's the best news we've heard in many hours. We have been prisoners here for over an hour under sentence of death from the strikers."

"Your name?"

"Richard Carstairs, an Englishman."

He gave a start and then a curt laugh. "Ah. Well, if you're glad to see us we are quite as glad to see you. You were in the other fight this morning and on the strikers' side."

"He's one of the leaders," broke in a faint voice. It was Basi's. He had recovered consciousness, and this was his last effort to harm us. "She's a leader too."

"And who the devil are you, my pretty one?"

"Peter Basi, a plumber. I was at work here at my trade, and this man nearly killed me

because I wouldn't fight against you." Not a bad effort at lying for a man just getting back his wits.

"Yes, he *was* at work at his trade, but not plumbing," said I.

"Silence," ordered the sergeant. "And you?" he asked Mirla.

"I am the Countess Mirla Gorkov, and can testify to all that has happened here."

"A curious place to find a Countess," grunted the sergeant suspiciously.

"How dare you," cried Mirla indignantly. "You are one of the 77th Regiment. Your Colonel, Baron Mirskoff, is my personal friend. Put a guard upon your speech."

"I meant no offence, Excellency," he replied in a very different tone.

"Mr. Carstairs and I were to have been shot by the strikers, and these letters were written by us to be sent to our friends. You had better take them now."

Her sharp imperative tone had its effect. He saluted and picked up the two papers. "I have only my duty to do, Excellency—to take prisoners all persons found in the house."

"Do it then. Get us away from here to a place of safety, and nothing else matters."

"And this fellow?" he asked, as he motioned to Basi.

"His name is what he tells you, Peter Basi, but he is a well-known anarchist; he tried to throw a bomb under Prince Volonesh's carriage four days ago, and now has attempted the lives of us both. Guard him well."

"It is a lie ; it is a lie," said Basi with a moan.

"He won't escape," declared the sergeant ; and leaving Basi in charge of a couple of men, he led us away.

Mirla was treated with courtesy and deference, but I was placed under a strong guard, and was obviously a prisoner in the full sense of the term.

CHAPTER XXV

BETWEEN THE UPPER AND THE NETHER STONES

DESPITE the fact that I was known to have taken part in the first fight against the troops—a little attention for which I had to thank Count Otto no doubt—I did not anticipate any serious consequences to myself from my capture.

The moment we reached the street, Mirla and I were separated and I was hurried off to the prison without being questioned. I had a cell to myself, and I had had too many rough and tumble experiences during the last few crowded hours to give a thought to any mere personal discomfort.

I had far more anxious matters to occupy my thoughts.

What would Mirla do ? She was safe from the strikers, but her very liberty served to place her at the mercy of the Princess and Count Otto. I had not forgotten that threat to deal with her as a lunatic ; and this attempt of hers to escape, her assumption of the part of the “ Little Anarchist,” and her conduct throughout it all might be distorted and used as proofs to support that charge.

Nor was this the worst. I had seen for

myself how eagerly she had faced death as the one ready means of cutting the knot of her perplexing dilemma, and I was quite sure she would not shrink from it now, if once convinced there was no other way.

I knew, however, that she would not take that last desperate step until she had done her utmost to secure my safety. It had been that quasi-selfish appeal of mine—that her death would put me on trial for her murder—which had stayed her hand at the supreme moment. And the same motive would stay her now.

And here in truth was the most absorbing and searching problem of all. Our love had been avowed.

In the face of what had appeared certain and inevitable death, the barrier between us had been broken like a sheet of tissue paper before the flood of passion. There was no wrong on her part or on mine in sweeping it aside and letting the sweet, delicious, consoling truth be told.

Her kisses still lingered on my lips and my heart beat fast at the memory of her caressing tenderness. The knowledge of her love was the most pregnant thing in my life, and I could see no shame in having urged her to the sweet confession, nor in having answered love vow with love vow. I knew that for us both the darkness of that terrible hour had been chased away by the solace which nothing save that love could have given.

But it was all different now. The barrier

was once more in place, clasped as with clamps of steel. Her word was plighted, and the pledge would be kept. I was once again no more than my cousin's messenger to take her to him, and bound by all the ties of honour to regard her as his promised wife and shut out every thought of winning her for myself.

I was ineffably miserable and utterly inconsequent. I railed impotently against fate. When I had been face to face with death, I had been loath to die ; but now that my life at least was safe, I was loath to live. And in the bitterness of that hour I almost regretted what I deemed the cowardly weakness which had prevented my yielding to Mirla's plea—to end the matter in the only way which offered.

A less morbid mood followed. I tore my thoughts away from this and forced myself to consider the means by which Mirla might be saved from the intrigue which would now threaten her again. They should at any rate be less unconventional than those which had ended so disastrously.

The law should be set to work upon Count Otto. Then I remembered that I had in my possession the papers which Viralmi had given to me. I was certain to be searched,—and as they would be seized and probably not returned, I resolved to commit to memory all the salient facts.

This work afforded a welcome relief to my racking thoughts ; and I had been engrossed in it for a long time when the door of my cell

was unlocked and I was led to a room where two or three police officials were seated at a paper-littered table.

I was apparently held to be a dangerous scoundrel,—and was guarded by four men, two at each side, all armed.

“Your name?” demanded the man at the head of the table.

“Richard Carstairs,” I answered, giving other personal details.

“When did you arrive in the city and for what purpose?”

I told him as shortly as possible, saying that in consequence of the bomb episode, I had stayed with Prince Volonesh.

“Has the prisoner been searched?” he asked one of my guards. “Search him,” he ordered, when he learnt I had not.

The man ran his hands over me and might have been a professional pickpocket by the dexterity with which he emptied mine.

The official examined everything closely, and then came my first check. “You have here passports in assumed names, for a man and two women. How did you get them?”

“It is all connected with the story of my presence in the city; that story closely affects a family of high position and——”

“How did you get them?” he cut in peremptorily.

“From a friend.”

“His name?”

“I cannot give it you.”

“There are very serious charges against

you. I warn you not to refuse to answer fully."

"With the one exception of that man's name I have nothing whatever to hide. But that name I decline to disclose."

"You know of course that they are forgeries—clever forgeries—and of the kind frequently used by the revolutionaries."

"I did not know it, but I can quite believe it."

"You admit, then, that you have a friend high enough in the revolutionary ranks to be able to get you these?"

"Yes, I suppose you may put it so. I have no wish to quibble, but I should like to explain two things—the friend is a man whose family I helped three or four years ago, and I came across him here because he was told off by the Strikers' Committee to shadow me and if practicable take my life. He saved me and I cannot therefore give his name."

"You pretend that you were in danger from the strikers?"

"As Richard Carstairs, certainly. Prince Volonesh can tell you that—but your secret agents can't serve you very well if you don't know it already."

"What do you mean by—'as Richard Carstairs'?"

"I mean that until an hour or two of the priest's house being carried by the troops, the strikers believed me to be Father Tesla himself."

"Father Tesla! You?" his lip curled in a sneer of incredulity. "You have a good imagination for an Englishman."

"And you the average insolence of a Russian," I retorted hotly.

"Silence."

"Not when you or any man dares to insinuate that I lie. I am not a dog or a serf or even one of your creatures for you to bully and insult at will. I am an Englishman with influential friends, among whom is our Ambassador at Petersburg. I can appeal to him, sir."

He bit his lip at this, and pulling some papers to him pretended to read them while his temper cooled.

"Do you admit that you were in the priest's house when the conflict took place there this morning and that you assisted the strikers to resist the attack of the troops?"

"Yes—if I had not made a show of it they would probably have shot me on the spot; and not me only, but my companions would have been shot as well—Countess Mirla Gorkov and the girl, Rachel Vologda."

"It's a very grave admission," he answered.

"Under the circumstances I had no option."

"What were what you call 'the circumstances'?"

"I am quite willing to tell them, but I would rather do so in private. I don't think all these men should hear."

"We do not study the wishes of prisoners

in that way," he replied, coldly. He was obviously glad to be able to hit at me officially. "If you do not answer it will be taken to mean that you have no answer to give except such as compromises you."

"Take it to mean what you please," said I warmly.

He gave me a stolid stare and then conferred with one or two other men at the table. My replies had been taken down and they compared them with some other papers—statements of some other prisoners, I guessed.

"You have an associate named Suvalski, from Vilna?" he asked suddenly, as if to surprise me into some compromising statement.

"I met a man, Maxim Suvalski, of that name during this business, but I should not call him an associate."

"And another associate—Drogoff?"

"Drogoff helped to save me from a mob of the strikers this morning."

"With a third associate, Basi, you had a quarrel, and nearly killed him?"

"Basi is the man from whom I took the bomb. He recognized us to-day in the priest's house, and I fought with him in order to escape. The attempt failed; he denounced us; we were put through a form of trial, and condemned to death. When your second attack was made and was succeeding he came with two others to carry out the sentence. Fortunately I succeeded in disabling him and drove the others away."

"But you acknowledge having fought with him?"

"Certainly."

He turned to his colleagues with a lift of the eyebrows and a shrug. "It is quite clear he is a revolutionary," he said to them.

"And if you treat your countrymen as you have treated me, it is much clearer why there are so many revolutionaries."

He took no notice of this and, after a minute's conference, announced his decision in formal tones: "You will be sent to Petersburg to be tried with your associates in crime. We have proof that you are not Richard Carstairs at all, but an imposter, assuming his name for criminal purposes."

So it was the Princess again. Her mark was unmistakable.

"I have no objection to Petersburg. Can I communicate with my friends?"

"No. You can apply for permission at Petersburg."

"I hope I may have the good fortune to meet there with a judge as fair, shrewd, courteous and impartial as you are the reverse."

With a wave of the hand he dismissed me and I was led back to my cell.

So far as I was concerned I had every reason to be satisfied with the decision. I was confident that a few hours at Petersburg would suffice to procure my liberty. The only fact that might have told against me—that at a critical moment I had knocked a

soldier on the head instead of Drogoff—could not be proved: it was evidently not known or it would have been mentioned: and on all the other points, ten minutes' explanation to a level-headed man, backed by the influence that would be behind me, would clear everything up.

But there was Mirla.

How long it might be before the railway was recovered from the strikers and I could be got through to the capital no one could tell. It might take days, and in that time anything might happen to her.

The thought chilled me with alarm. She would be entirely in the power of the Princess and Count Otto; the Prince was hopelessly embittered against her; his mind had been poisoned, and that she should have taken my part and tried to escape with me after my supposed infamous treatment of his wife, would more than fill the cup of his anger against her.

If they drove her to extremes, I knew too well what she would do. They were certain to keep from her any knowledge of what had become of me, and I was powerless to communicate so much as a single word to her. The Princess was more than capable of telling her I had been shot as a rebel; indeed, I could picture her stealthy delight in such a story. And if Mirla were driven to bay, I was despondently confident she would take her own life.

These thoughts were as hot irons in my flesh as I sat gnashing my teeth in impotent anger.

I would have bribed one of the gaolers—a Russian official of that grade is always amenable—but all my money had been taken from me, and even a Russian would have scouted the idea of being bribed with a promise to pay.

I thought of attempting an escape. But I was no prison breaker, and the massive stone masonry of my prison laughed me to scorn in stolid contempt.

There was but one feeble set off—I could return from Petersburg, armed with influence sufficient to find and free Mirla if she were alive, or, so far as Count Otto was concerned, to avenge her if she were dead.

A prey to a hundred fanciful thoughts of this gloomy pain-filling nature, I passed a time in the cell which might have been counted by hours or by minutes, so absorbed was I in dismal forebodings, when the cell door was unbolted again and I was ordered to follow the gaoler.

All places were the same to me and I went without a question, nor would it have been answered had I put one.

In silence I was taken out of the prison and placed in a carriage. Two men entered it with me, one sitting by my side the other opposite, while a third mounted the seat by the coachman, and in grim silence was driven through the cool night.

The streets were clear of the mob. The rising appeared to have been quelled, and everywhere troops were patrolling the city in

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great force. I must have passed hundreds of soldiers, foot and horse, during the ride.

Presently I recognized the streets. We drove by the *Kaiserhof*, passed the Market Place held in great strength by troops, rattled by the end of the priest's street, and then with a sudden turn took the direction of Prince Volonesh's mansion.

To my infinite surprise we swept sharply into the approach to the Prince's house and pulled up at the door.

What was the meaning of this ?

CHAPTER XXVI

THE PRINCESS IN A NEW PART

AS soon as the carriage came to a standstill at the door of Prince Volonesh's house, one of the men alighted and signed to me to follow.

"Why am I brought here?" I asked. I was all against re-entering the house which I had left in such apparent disgrace.

"I cannot answer questions. Our orders are to bring you here. Alight at once. We have no time to waste."

"Before I will enter that house I must know whether the Prince is aware of my coming."

"Are you a fool to think the police dump prisoners into princes' houses without their knowledge or against their wishes? Alight at once."

"Fetch the Prince," I added. "We'll see what he says."

But instead of doing anything of the kind, the three laid hold of me, dragged me forcibly from the carriage, and carried me up the broad flight of steps and into the library. There they dropped me on the floor, with about as much concern as if I had been a sack of flour, and left me.

My first impulse was to laugh at the extreme

grotesqueness of the situation, as I lay sprawling on my back. It was certainly the first time in my life I had ever had an invitation to enter another man's house in this insistent and undignified form.

I scrambled to my feet, however, and catching sight of myself in a mirror, laughed once more. I was a deplorable object. My face was dirty, my hands begrimed, my hair tousled and my Russian dress disordered and torn in half a dozen places and filthy with dust and mud and blood stains. The sleepless night and the hours of strain and anxiety had left their traces on my dirty face, in my blood-shot eyes, and worn and haggard expression. It was little wonder that the police official had taken me for anything but an Englishman of means and influence.

Whether I looked well or ill, clean or dirty, was a matter of infinite unimportance, however, compared with the meaning of my compulsory presence in the Prince's house.

Of all the developments of the situation this was the least to be expected. Apparently, I was free, so far as the police were concerned—for I heard the carriage in which I had been brought driven away. I knew, of course, that the Prince's influence would be great enough for him to secure my liberation if he chose to exert it. But that he should raise a finger to help me out of any trouble, in view of his bitter hostility toward me, was almost incredible.

Yet here I was, and here it seemed I was to

remain. The great mansion was wrapped in silence. No one came near me; and at length bewildered curiosity began to change to exasperated tediousness.

I was not a prisoner, for on trying the door of the room I found it unlocked. I rang the bell, but it was not answered until I had repeated the ring five or six times. Then a servant came.

"Tell Prince Volonesh I am here and will see him at once."

"His Highness is not at home, sir."

"Not at home!" I repeated in surprise.

"Who is at home?"

"I am to request you to be so good as to wait"; and without giving me time to question him further, the man went off.

"To be so good as to wait." An unusually polite phrase to use considering the relations between us. Yet the Prince must have left the message. And then a fantastic thought occurred to me. Had he secured my freedom that he might arrange a meeting for that supposed insult of mine to the Princess.

Rubbish! I dismissed the idea and all other thoughts with it; and threw myself into an easy chair resolved to await what was to come. The result may be easily guessed. I was quite worn out, mind and body, and in two minutes was fast asleep.

It was only uneasy sleep, broken by dreams—snatches of the recent events jumbled up in a confused medley and mingled with a fantastic court scene, in which I was about to be tried

for my life. My name was called once, twice, thrice, in strident tones ; and at the third time I woke to find the Princess standing close to my chair.

I sprang to my feet, blinking my eyes and collecting my wool-gathering wits.

"You were sleeping soundly, Mr. Carstairs ; I called you several times and thought I should never wake you."

"I was very tired," I mumbled, stupidly.

She smiled as her eyes took in my dishevelled appearance. "You have done enough to tire you," she said.

"I was brought forcibly to this house ; I asked for Prince Volonesh and was requested to wait. I am waiting for—His Highness." I was pulling myself together fast and made my meaning clear.

"No, Mr. Carstairs. It was I for whom you were waiting. It was I who secured your liberation, and I who caused you to be brought here."

"You will understand me then if I say that I cannot accept such a service at your hands."

"You cannot help it now. You are free. You could go back to the prison, but only to be turned from the door. I have explained everything in regard to you. My testimony and that of my brother have cleared you of all suspicion.

I was not sufficiently quixotic to feel anything but profound relief at hearing this ; but why the Princess should have done it,

passed my understanding. I distrusted her so thoroughly that I looked for some further undercurrent scheme.

"I would rather speak to the Prince himself," I said after a pause.

"That is not very encouraging."

"I have found your Highness well able to defend your own and your brother's interests without any encouragement from me. I repeat, I would rather speak to the Prince himself, or at least in his presence."

She made a gesture of protest and impatience. "You don't understand. Matters are altered. I am in deep trouble and grief."

I could have retorted pretty hotly about the trouble she had caused Mirla, but contented myself with remembering it, and remained silent.

During the pause she gave signs of embarrassment; her fingers were closely interlocked, and she appeared to be at a loss what to say next. Then almost impetuously, yet with agitated hesitancy: "I—I ask your pardon, Mr. Carstairs. I want you to forgive the trick I played you."

She took me so completely by surprise that for the moment I could find no answer. My silence irritated her.

"I have never humbled myself to a man before in all my life," she cried with trembling lip. "Why don't you answer?" A singular mixture of lip humility with the more characteristic indignation which set her eyes flashing. I could understand how such a

request tortured her pride, but I did not yet see her motive.

"Your Highness places me in a very awkward position. So far as your act harmed only myself, the matter is at an end, since I presume you will explain everything to the Prince."

"Is it English chivalry to take advantage of a woman's misery?" Very little humbling here—scorn, anger and reproach rather.

"It would be affectation for me not to tell you that I know quite well what your Highness has deemed it necessary to do for your brother and against the Countess Mirla and against myself. Your enmity has all but cost us both our lives, and it was your last intention—to have the Countess declared insane—which drove us to the extreme step of attempting flight."

"I had no such plan or thought," she cried.

"Then it was Count Otto's," I replied. She had descended to the vulgarity of an open falsehood, but you can't tell a woman she lies. "He admitted almost as much to me. My object is not, however, to bring any charges now—everything will of course be investigated legally—but to ask you to tell me if you have changed your hostile attitude toward the Countess Mirla; and if so, why?"

"What do you mean by 'investigated legally'?"

"Your brother has stolen a hundred thousand roubles of her money, and will of course have to answer for the theft."

"I don't believe it. I won't. What proof have you?"

"Pardon me if I cannot discuss that."

She turned to a little table behind her and handed me a packet with the broken seal of the police. "Here are your valuables and papers, Mr. Carstairs"; watching me closely as I opened the packet.

The paper of details against Count Otto was missing. "Thank you," I said. No more.

"Well, are they not all there?" she asked, her eyes still fixed on me.

I met the look steadily and paused. "I have an excellent memory, your Highness. I anticipated the loss of it. It will not make an atom of difference."

Either the reply or my manner in making it affected her deeply. With a heavy sigh as of despair, she turned away and stood a moment with her face averted. If she was merely acting now she played well.

"Does Mirla know this?"

"No."

"Thank God. Mr. Carstairs, my honour is in your hands. It was at my instigation Otto acted as he did."

"I beg you to tell me nothing," I protested.

But she did not heed me. "You can have your revenge. You have me at your mercy," she cried, casting all reserve to the winds. "I set my husband against you, and you can now alienate him from me. I am more guilty than Otto, and you can prove to the Prince

that the wife he adores is a criminal who has brought disgrace and shame upon him. You will gain your end. I was the thief ; I tried to hush it up by the marriage ; I planned the forced marriage ; and—yes I lied to you just now—I did intend to have Mirla pronounced insane.”

She was, as I have said, a very lovely woman and never looked more beautiful than in the passionate abandonment with which the self-accusing outburst was made. But if she reckoned on rousing any sympathy or pity in me, she blundered. I hated her. The thought of her calculated cruelty to Mirla filled me with repugnance and loathing, and I was convinced that she had only made the confession now because for some reason every other path was closed.

I made no reply and my silence appeared to alarm her.

“ You are hard like a bar of steel,” she cried. “ Are you not satisfied ? Is not my humiliation complete ? Would you have me grovel in the dust to you ? ”

“ I do not pretend to have any sympathy with you and do not aspire to be your judge. Of course you have an object in making this confession. Will you tell it me ? And, if you please, without emotion ? ”

She turned to me like an infuriated tigress and had it been in her power would have killed me, I believe. She looked it, at least, and was some seconds before she could regain command of herself. “ Otto is dying, Mr.

Carstairs," she said, her voice low and pregnant with genuine emotion.

I started. I had not expected that. Of course, all the plans of the two were but dust and ashes now. With the Count dying, the theft could not be hushed up by his marriage with Mirla. The one thing for her to secure, therefore, was silence; and the price offered for it was my liberation now, to be followed probably by the family permission for Mirla's marriage.

While these thoughts were flying through my head she was watching me intently, and when I kept silence the colour slowly ebbed from her face. Her doubts in regard to me added to her grief for her brother were causing intense suffering. "He was in the riots to-day—he saw you in the priest's house—and he was wounded and caught by the mob and cruelly maimed. Oh, my God, I shall go mad."

"And the Countess Mirla?"

"She is safe with the Countess Ribolsk and some friends. She will of course go to—to England—whenever you wish. Pardon me for breaking your condition—I cannot think of Otto without—without emotion."

"So far as I am concerned, there shall be absolute silence as to the past, Princess—and I think I can answer for Mirla."

"Thank God! It was only you I feared," she exclaimed fervently, the admission slipping out unintentionally, I think, for after a pause she covered it by adding: "Mirla would have thought of the family honour." She paused

and I turned to go. "There is one thing more. Otto wishes to see you."

"I would rather not," I said, hastily.

"He is dying, Mr. Carstairs"; and after some pressure I was idiot enough to yield.

She hurried away, saying she would prepare him; and the strange interview was over. I could have cursed myself for yielding. I had a nervous dread of the ordeal. I was not in the least sorry for Count Otto, cared not a button whether he lived or died, and was in no mood to play the hypocrite at a death-bed scene. There was of course no escape now; but as the minutes passed my reluctance and aversion increased fast, mingled with an ardent wish that she would return and let me get the interview over.

At last the door opened and I sprang up to meet her. But to my chagrin and infinite embarrassment it was Prince Volonesh who entered.

His face was as gloomy as the Styx on seeing me. "Mr. Carstairs!" he exclaimed. "This is an unwarrantable outrage. How dare you force yourself into my house in disguise?"

To have told him that the Princess had brought me, would scarcely have been tactful under the circumstances. "I did not force myself," I answered. "I was brought here by force by the police."

"Would you lie to me, sir?" he thundered.

"Not to you nor to any man. What I say is the truth, Prince Volonesh."

He flung the door wide. "Your presence

is a pollution of the honour of my house. Leave it before I degrade myself by throwing you out."

Rough this, considering all things. But obviously the only course was for me to go. So I choked down my indignation and went.

But at the door the Princess met me. "Otto is ready, Mr. Carstairs?"

"What's that?" cried her husband. "Do you mean you have disgraced me by speaking to this scoundrel here to-night, Molda?"

"Of course, Gregory. Otto wished to see Mr. Carstairs, so I secured his liberation and the police brought him here at my instance. We have done him a grave injustice. Come with me and I'll explain."

The Prince looked vicious enough to have struck us both; but nothing happened.

They crossed together into another room, the Princess turning to ask me to wait for them.

The Prince was very much in love with his wife—he did not know her so well as I did, I suppose—but I had grave doubts whether she could win in this encounter.

Anyway that mattered very little to me, and I could await the result with comparative indifference.

CHAPTER XXVII

ON THE "FALCON"

"LEFT Minsk this morning; coming in *Falcon*: arrive London say a week."

I crumpled up the paper and tossed it overboard with a laugh. It was the rough draft of the wire I had sent to Sir Andrew from Königsberg on the day the *Falcon* sailed: and here we were five days out and nearly all the North Sea still to cross.

We had had a deuce of a time in getting out of the Cattegat—beating every yard of the way against a dead northerly breeze, stiff enough to keep the Countess Ribolsk in her cabin, not ill, but reading her Bible sedulously and full of regrets for having yielded to Mirla's insistent preference to make the passage in the *Falcon* instead of by train and steamer.

A lovely run for a day and night, the yacht as steady as a paving stone, had, however, leavened the spritely little lady's fears with the leaven of that delight with which only such a day at sea can gladden the land-weary soul.

A splendid run it was, and my skipper, Robson, had turned his quid in sheer pride of heart every time he squinted up critically at the white canvas, as creaseless as that of a

racing craft ; and then the calm fell, and for thirty hours we lay as still as a toy boat in a bath when the baby skipper is asleep.

This was the weather for a hardy seawoman like Countess Ribolsk. She had passed unscathed through the trials of the Cattegat, and she had enjoyed the rush through the water with the beam wind, but she revelled in the calm, as pleased as a child. It was her first experience on a yacht, and she found as much delight in the breezeless sunshine as did Parker, who was engrossed in teaching Rachel Vologda English—and other things. He had a very attentive pupil, too.

"Life at sea is, after all, most delightful," said the Countess to me, as she lolled in a deck chair, and she sought to rally Mirla out of her mood of abstracted thoughtfulness.

"I can't understand you, Mirla. Surely you can't feel sea-sick when there's no motion. Or is it the sun bothers you?"

"No, dear," said Mirla, with a smile, as she looked up from a book. "I was reading."

The little lady raised her head and glanced at the book. "H'm! Page 10—and you began the book yesterday. I am sure the sea or something disagrees with you. It must be your liver. I ought to have known better than to bring you this way. The train would have been best."

"It would have been quickest, dear," said Mirla.

The Countess laughed and clapped her

hands. "Of course. Hear that, Mr. Carstairs. I knew there was a reason for this change in her. She is generally as bright as a diamond in the sunlight. But I didn't suspect this was it. You're not getting her fast enough to—we know who's waiting on the other side"; and she shook her head knowingly.

Good-hearted, garrulous little body, ignorant of all but that which lay right on the surface before her kindly eyes and utterly unconscious of the turgid, troubled depths of passion below it, she rattled on in this fashion appealing now to me and again to Mirla, and chattering a prodigious amount of wise nonsense about love's impatience.

We both followed the lead she gave, making answers which seemed to confirm her in her judgment of the situation. Both playing our parts and acting up to the unspoken compact mutually agreed upon from the first moment we had met after that fateful hour in Father Tesla's house.

That hour—the hour of our spoken love—was to be forgotten—dead, and buried in the tomb of hopeless regrets; and each was to help the other to be true to the sacrifice which honour demanded.

To bear the Countess's chattering inconsequence was thus no more than a trifling embarrassment. When one has weathered a cyclone a summer squall has no terrors.

The Princess had kept her compact with me. No further opposition had been offered to

Mirla's leaving, and the Prince himself had used his influence to get the cancelled permission renewed.

What the Princess had said to him on the night I was taken to the house I do not know, but he had returned to me in a quite different mood. A changed man, indeed. She had succeeded in persuading him that I had never insulted her, and had done this without in the least impairing his confidence in her.

He offered me profuse apologies for his treatment on the former occasion and on that night, and persuaded me to remain in the house, protesting that otherwise he should not feel his apologies had been accepted. Word was sent at once to Mirla that I was safe, and the next afternoon she came to the Prince's where everything was explained to her.

The first few minutes of that meeting tried us both. Each was full of anxious doubts as to the other's intentions; and the presence of the Prince and Princess rendered open explanations impossible. But we had learned to understand one another without words, and we did then. When I had told her that all opposition to her marriage with my cousin was withdrawn, and she had declared that she would go to England for it and was ready to start at any moment, a single glance sufficed to seal the compact of mutual acceptance of the position so outlined.

In the meantime the Prince had exerted himself so strenuously with the authorities at

Petersburg that the cancelling of the permission was in its turn annulled, and the telegram arrived while Mirla was still at the house.

The same influence which obtained it secured places for us in one of the first trains that left after the line had been seized from the strikers.

On the day of the fight at the priest's house, a great force of troops had been most unexpectedly poured into the city from the South, and their arrival had broken up for the time the power of the mob. It was a result of this movement which had led to our liberation at Tesla's. The attack on the barracks and armoury had been beaten off, and the soldiers had been dispatched hot-foot to the priest's in the hope of catching some of the strike leaders.

A last big struggle had taken place in the city while I was in the prison, disastrous in its results to the local revolutionary party. Among the killed I read Drogoff's name, and learned that he had been shot when leading a forlorn hope against the troops with a courage which even the soldiers recognized.

Nothing could more eloquently illustrate the woeful wrongheadedness of a government than the fact that it could find no better use for such men than to goad them by oppression into armed rebellion and then shoot them down in the maintenance of misrule. Men who could and should and would be the buttresses and pillars of a well-governed state,

knouted into the gutter, gaoled like criminals, or shot like mad dogs. Poor Drogoff!

I sat thinking of him that breezeless afternoon when Countess Ribolsk had fallen asleep in her deck chair and Mirla, her book on her lap, was staring over the *Falcon's* bulwarks at the blue glassy sea.

We spoke very rarely, except in the presence of the Countess. There was no use in mere talk. That could not alter things for us. Silence itself was far more eloquent; for we both understood.

In one thing only we differed. I fretted at the delay. I had been against this trip in the yacht for that reason and had wished to rush home by the quickest route. But Mirla had urged otherwise; and I had of course yielded. And the enforced delay through the calm tried my patience.

She read my mood. Perhaps she had noticed my impatient glances at the sky and the flapping sails. Suddenly she turned to me. "This delay frets you?"

"It gives the boat no chance of showing what she can do," I replied.

"She showed that all yesterday," she said. "You are anxious to—to get home, and I—I think I hated her for her speed."

That was the first time that even a corner of the veil had been lifted by either of us, and I deemed it best to let it fall again.

There was a long silence until she asked: "How long shall we be before we reach England?"

"At this rate?" I replied with a smile.

"Don't," with the little insistent foot-tap I knew so well.

"Impossible even to guess, till we get the wind."

Presently I saw Robson taking a long look all round the horizon and then rivet his gaze on the south-west. A few minutes later I noticed that the canvas was being taken in and Robson was calling to the hands to "look alive."

"We are going to have a breeze," I said to Mirla.

"How do you know?" I explained to her; and soon afterwards the skipper came up.

"You'll have the fiddles on for dinner, sir," he said. "She's coming up from the sou'-west. More than a capful of her, too."

"Is there going to be a storm, captain?" asked Mirla.

"It's like this, miss—my lady—I mean. What landfolks call a storm we old seamen laugh at. But we're going to have some wind that'll put us a long way on our road."

"I'm sorry for it," she replied, half absently.

"Oh, there's no cause for any fear. On a craft like the *Falcon* we laugh at wind or waves," but he gave me a look as he turned away that made me understand we were in for a spell of very dirty weather.

"He need not have been so anxious to assure me there was no danger. I suppose

it's horrible of me, but I——" She left the sentence unfinished, and with a sigh rose and went below.

I knew what she meant. She had not put aside altogether that thought of hers of the "only way" to cut the knot of our trouble; and I was still full of the grim thought when the Countess awoke and asked what we had been chattering about so merrily and noisily that she had been unable to sleep.

Robson was right about the weather. That night we had more than enough wind to make up for the hours of calm.

There was no danger; but to any one unused to the sea and ignorant of the *Falcon's* qualities as a sea boat, the storm was bad enough to be alarming. The Countess was at her Bible again; reading it piously, but thinking far less of the words than of the howling of the wind, the lashing of the waves, and lurching, pitching motion of the yacht.

At the height of the storm I was standing on the deck under the lee of the companion when I caught sight of Mirla. She was holding to a rail on the windward side trying to get forward along the wet canting deck, straining her eyes toward the bows eagerly.

With difficulty I made my way to her. In the roaring of wind and sea it was almost impossible for a voice to be heard by an unaccustomed ear, and though I shouted to her that she was running some risk where she stood, she did not hear me.

Filled with a fear I would not name even to

myself, I reached her side and grasped her by the arm.

"You must come below," I shouted, putting my lips close to her ear.

At that moment the *Falcon* dipped her beak into a big wave, and a mass of water came tumbling on board to stream away to leeward in a flat, white, seething spread of foam.

Half leading, half carrying her, I took Mirla below. Leaning against the table she looked at me, her face white and strained and her eyes wide and wild. "Ah, you are cruel," she said.

"You went on purpose?"

"I did not know. I chose the wrong side," she murmured, in a low voice. Then vehemently: "Can I not end it as I will?"

"Is this the use you would make of *my* boat?"

It was the old selfish argument again.

She fell into a chair and leaned her head on her arms. We remained thus for many minutes, the howling racket of the storm without no greater than that in her heart.

She grew calm presently and got up. "It would have been so easy; but I will not be a coward again," she said.

"That is part of our compact, mind."

"Yes, yes. I promise, on my honour"; and with that she went to her cabin.

The storm was over by the morning; and as if in apology to the *Falcon* for the trouble of the night's work, the weather was all that a timid landsman, Parker even, could have wished for the rest of the run.

We sighted the English coast just at sunset after a glorious day; and when the twilight faded the young moon came out to pale the twinkling lights ashore.

Mirla had been on deck when the land was first sighted and getting up from her chair had stared earnestly at it for a few minutes. "And that is—England!" she murmured, and went below.

I did not see her again until we were close in, and I was giving Parker his orders as to the luggage.

"You won't send us off the boat to-night?" she asked, as he went away.

"I think we can catch a train to town to-night."

"Not to-night," she cried, almost pleadingly. "Let me have one more night's respite." Then as if regretting the words, she smiled and added: "I think the Countess likes being on board."

"Which Countess?" said I, thoughtlessly.

She gestured in protest and sighed. "Not to-night, Dick." Her lips trembled. This was the first time she had spoken my name since Minsk.

"Of course," I answered. "You have only to ask. You know that."

She gazed across the water to the shore lights with an expression of wistful sadness; and after a long silence murmured: "England—the land of freedom. Heaven help me!" This with another deep sigh.

"You are wrong to be afraid, Mirla."

“Am I? I suppose I am—but why?”

“He is one of the best-hearted fellows in the world.”

She paused again and then very slowly and sadly : “That does not make it any more the land of freedom, Dick.”

At that moment Countess Ribolsk joined us with a number of her prattling questions about matters of no consequence to any one, even to herself.

Still her interruption was very opportune.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE END OF MY MISSION

THE Countess Rībolsk was feeling the motion of the boat so strongly on the run up in the train that she declared the English railways must be the worst laid in the world and that the carriage rocked more violently than the *Falcon*. But some scent and a pillow soothed her and after a mile or two she went off to sleep.

Mirla was almost silent and very preoccupied all the way. Now that the moment for the meeting with Andrew was actually at hand, I think she was nervous. Neither the novelty of the surroundings nor the freshness of the scenery could win her away from her oppressing thoughts. She sat with her face on her hand staring out of the window with a self-engrossed earnestness which showed that her mind heeded nothing of what her eyes saw.

When I offered her an illustrated paper she started as if at a sudden recall from some mountain solitude in thought-land, before she took it with a smiling word of thanks. Two minutes afterwards it lay on her lap unheeded and she was staring away again over the landscape with the same look in her eyes.

My heart ached for her, but no word or act of mine could lighten the burden she had to bear.

We had covered more than half the distance when she asked: "How long now?"

"Something less than an hour—three quarters about."

"Will he be there?"

"I hope so. I wired him the time of our arrival."

"Hope?" she echoed.

"Yes, hope," I replied firmly, and after a pause added: "You must make an effort, you know."

"Yes, I know. All my life."

"It does no good to brood."

"I shall play my part. Don't say any more—please."

Not another word passed between us until we ran into Liverpool Street.

My cousin was not there. We waited for him until the bustle caused by the arrival of the express had ceased, and save for the porters, we three were almost alone on the long platform. Parker and Rachel had gone on with the luggage to the Carlton.

"We had better go to the hotel; my cousin is probably waiting for us there," I said.

Even the throng and crowds of the city failed to rouse Mirla, but the Countess was amazed, although she tried to conceal her amazement under a cloak of patriotism.

"I have never seen so many people any-

where ; but what a dingy city compared with Petersburg, and what narrow streets."

I apologized for the city and assured her that London had streets fine enough to compare with any in Europe. She took the apology seriously and was good enough to concede that the open space by the Royal Exchange was a good site, Queen Victoria Street quite a respectable thoroughfare, the Embankment really excellent, and Trafalgar Square worthy of the greatest city in the world.

As we got out at the Carlton I saw Mirla was making a big effort for composure. But when to my intense surprise my cousin was not there and had sent no message, her indignation began to show.

"He is a cool hand, this lover of yours, Mirla," laughed the Countess. "Very English, I suppose, but more English than courteous."

"Is it the English method ?" Mirla asked me.

"We English are not usually termed discourteous. But I cannot understand why Andrew is not here. I presume that he is away from London, and has not had my telegrams. While you are lunching I will go and find out."

But the Countess had developed a bad headache, and said she was going to lie down. She would meet Sir Andrew at dinner, when perhaps the floor would have ceased to rock.

I took this to be her excuse for not being

present when Andrew and Mirla met, and I said I would drive at once to my cousin's house. I must find out where he was and wire him.

"You will come back?" said Mirla.

"I hope to be with you at dinner."

"Oh, do," cried the Countess. "It's so much easier to be number three in such a case when there's a number four to talk to."

"I'll come and be number four," I answered with a smile.

But I was bitterly angry at Andrew's conduct. It was a sheer outrage. He must have had my telegram from Königsberg; and although the trip over had taken longer than I told him, there wasn't the shadow of an excuse for his having left town without arranging to be called back the instant the news of our arrival at Harwich reached his house.

I said some pretty hard things of him to myself in my anger and meant to repeat them to his face the moment we met. That he should treat such a girl as Mirla in this cool, insulting fashion made my blood boil.

But my anger was nothing compared with my surprise when his man, Calthorp, told me he was at home waiting for me. I found him smoking at his ease, and reading a novel with a large iced soda and whisky at his elbow.

"What the devil is the meaning of this, Andrew?" I exclaimed hotly.

"How do, Dick, old man?" holding out to me two fingers. "Meaning of what?"

"Why weren't you at the station or even at the Carlton to meet us? You got my wires, I suppose?"

"Why not? Sit down and have a cigar. The sea or the sun or something has tanned your face pretty badly—and you look bursting with energy."

"I'm nearer bursting with rage."

"Why?"

"Why? Good heavens, isn't the thing clear enough?"

"Don't be so violent, Dick. I haven't had lunch yet. You've kept me waiting for you long past my hour for getting to the club."

"You talk about your confounded club when you've been guilty of this most infernal rudeness to such a girl—the girl you've had me bring from Russia. It's an infernal outrage."

He waved his white hand protestingly, laid down his novel, took a long drink of whisky and soda, and then said laughingly: "Don't enthuse about her."

"I'll be hanged if this doesn't beat me. It's you ought to enthuse. She's the most splendid, plucky, heroic little soul that ever breathed, and you treat her in this way. I'm hanged if I couldn't thrash you for it."

"Don't thrill, Dick. Take a lump of ice and sit on it and get cool."

"Do you mean that this cursed neglect is intentional?"

He took out his scented handkerchief and affected to fan himself slowly, watching me

with a smile of amusement. "Yes," he said.

"Then it's the act of a blackguard, Andrew," I cried furiously.

He laughed. "I'm afraid that's about what it looks like, Dick," he murmured, wagging his head. "Just calculated blackguardism. But, you see, I wanted to know something about her before we met. Just tell me, there's a good sort. Have you had a good time in Minsk? Tell me about it and about her. I didn't want to meet her right off without a chat with you first as to the mood she's in. I can't enthuse easily, you know—need working up. Was she sick on the boat? It upsets some of them frightfully."

"Here, I've no use for a man of your sort—to talk that kind of rot about a girl like Mirla."

"Well, tell me. Did you see enough of her out there to form an opinion? *Did* you have a good time? Can't you see I'm impatient to know everything?" he added, drawling the words languidly.

"You're the limit, Andrew, as the Yanks say. I devilishly nearly lost my life over this business, and so did she"; and I gave him an impressionist sketch of what had happened, and something more than a sketch of Mirla's conduct.

He showed himself rather bored by the story. "A bit long," he murmured. "If what you say is right I'm afraid she's rather an intolerably energetic person."

At that the last shred of my patience parted and I gave him what some people term "a

piece of my mind"—no niggardly piece either—as I enforced the contrast between Mirla's excellence and deserts and his treatment of her.

He took it all very coolly, tapping his fingers on the arm of his easy-chair, using his handkerchief as a fan, sipping his whisky and soda and punctuating my periods and epithets with lazy words. When I finished he lit a fresh cigar very slowly and carefully, got up, stretched himself, drew a deep breath, and regarded me with a lip smile, slow and weary at first, but gathering humour as it spread up to his eyes.

He came up and stood before me and held out his hand. "Thanks, awfully, Dick. I think you've done about all I wished."

"I don't want your hand, Andrew." I was too disgusted.

Then he confused me. "Dick," he said, in a slow measured tone, pointing his finger at me accusingly, "are you sure you've not played the villain?"

I jumped up and faced him. "What do you mean?"

"Keep cool," he said deliberately; he was indeed irritatingly deliberate in manner as well as words, and rivetted his eyes on mine as he went on. "I have a question to ask. On your honour, can you tell me you don't love Mirla Gorkov?"

The question took my breath away, and I was lost for an answer. "Andrew, how dare you ask such a question?"

"Perhaps because you dare not answer it," he replied in a tone of greater sternness than I would have deemed possible, while his face darkened under heavily frowning brows. "You need not give me any other answer. But does she care for you—on your honour?"

My eyes dropped. I could not meet his. I felt shamed and confused. "It was before I knew who she was, Andrew; and when we were face to face with what seemed inevitable death, the truth came out. Not a word would ever have been spoken but for that, not a word has been spoken since. On my honour."

He made no reply. Feeling somewhat like a whipped hound I looked up to tell him of my intention to go abroad for some years.

Again he surprised me. He was holding out his hand with a smile. "It's an infernal shame to torture a good fellow like you, Dick—but I had to make sure, you know. She has to marry one of us, and if she hadn't fallen in love with you and you with her, I'd have had to go through with it."

"Do you mean——"

"Don't be a cuckoo. Do you think I should have sent a fellow like you to represent a fellow like me if I'd cared for her now, in that way? I just planned this little scheme, that's all."

"And that banana peel tale and the injured knee and all the rest of it."

"Mere circumlocution, Dick, for purposes of guile."

"You're a jolly dishonourable sort of a

schemer, only fit for the Diplomatic Service. I ought to jolly well kick you, but——”

“You haven’t time. You’d better get back to the Carlton.”

“And you really don’t want to marry Mirla?” I cried.

“Difficult to believe, isn’t it? But true. I don’t want to marry anybody, and what’s more, I shan’t have to, thank Heaven.”

“I’ll go and break the bad news,” I said, with a grin.

“And I’ll go to lunch. So long.”

I think I must have jumped from his house to the Carlton, for the next second—at least so it seemed—I was hiding my delight under a sort of mute’s look as I entered the room where Mirla sat awaiting my cousin.

She looked up, astonishment in her dear blue eyes as she saw me. I sighed and tossed up my hands as in despair. She tried hard to read the thoughts behind the mask.

I sat down opposite to her without a word. I was afraid for the moment that if I spoke I should smile and the truth would come blundering out. But at last I sobered myself—really sobered myself, for I was drunk with love for her and the glad new knowledge that she was mine—and said gravely: “I am to ask you if you will be married at once, and if so, whether you will have the honeymoon on the *Falcon* or elsewhere.”

It was a long trying speech under the circumstances, but I must have done it splendidly. I was under the full fire of her eyes all the time,

and when I finished she dropped them and sighed.

"It is all one to me, at once or later." Then very suddenly she looked up. "But why the *Falcon*? What is it, Dick?"

The latter question quickly, because I had seized the moment to smile and she had caught me. She knew I was not likely to smile at such a moment without good cause.

I tried to look grave again. "I have very serious news for you, Countess."

It was not a bit of good now. It was her old trick of reading my thoughts. The colour rushed to her face, her eyes shone, her lip trembled, and involuntarily she stretched an eager hand toward me. "Oh, Dick, can it be?"

I nodded. "Andrew sent me to Minsk on purpose."

"The traitor!" she laughed.

"Atrocious, wasn't it?"

"Such deceit!"

"Can you ever forgive him?" I had captured that eager hand now.

"And you could bring me that message? Dick!" This in smiling happy reproach.

"It's a true one, Mirla. Shall it be on the *Falcon*?"

It was the *Falcon*; and almost at once.

THE END

